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FEATURING

BY-LINES CAN BE HEADLINES

a novelet of hit-and-run murder by **NOEL LOOMIS**

INNOCENT PARTY

a Marshal Pedley novelet by **STEWART STERLING**

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THRILLING DETECTIVE

Vol. LXVII, No. 3

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

April, 1951

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The gang had the motorists of Johnson City at their mercy till they hung a bit-and-run rap on a trouble-shooting lug like Gregg Lane!

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Headquarters

WE COME up with a bang next issue in presenting to you a brand-new detective by the name of Stephen McCloud in a stirring tale of adventure, intrigue and violent death among the slick diamond thieves, crooks in high places, clever manipulators and a batch of high-powered double-crossers both male and female. All these you will find in a fiction feast par excellence—in our next issue of THRILLING DETECTIVE Magazine!

The whale of a yarn in question goes by the name of WHAT PRICE MURDER and the author is that well-known weaver of these enthralling tales, Cleve F. Adams, who gave a fiction-hungry public those other famous sleuths, Rex McBride and James J. Flagg. Lots of people like Steve, working now for West Coast Indemnity, a blame sight better. You paid two dollars or more for these Cleve F. Adams stories when they came out in book form just a short while ago.

Brilliant Crooks

In this gripping detective yarn, friends, you will meet as brilliant a bunch of assorted crooks as it has ever been your keen delight to catch up with. Some of them, incidentally, you'll never suspect. The whole yarn is going to hold you spellbound until the very last page.

How much ice is involved in this particular case—have you any idea? Well folks—it's just a cool quarter of a million—no pun intended of course! And who among these Runyonesque characters did the deed? Come now—you don't expect us to tell you that, do you? We'll just give you that proverbial peek under the curtain. Maybe it'll be even less of a peek than usual.

The stones originally belonged to that "pain in the neck," the dealer, Emil Kahn. He wants them back—or their equivalent in cash. There are expert diamond thieves in the offing of course. Known to both the police (as typified for us by that extra tough cop, Lieutenant Brannigan) and to the indemnity people, not only by McCloud, but to his pal, Jessup, vice president of West Coast. Right here let us say, perhaps there is truth in the old adage: "There's honor among thieves." On

the other hand—maybe there isn't. Let us remember that.

A Smooth Article

Of the assorted and sundry crooks with which we shall deal in this knockout of a yarn, and heading the list, is one smooth article yclept Duke D'Arcy, professional gambler, and Power Behind the Throne in this ugly web of crime—if we may mix our metaphor a bit. The Duke however, didn't steal the stones. He's just mixed up with a shady lady who had considerable to do with it. That'll be the two-timing Margie Garland. She'd be sorry, if she could; but those scintillating pieces of pure carbon cost her her life. Altogether four people meet the Grim Reaper because of them too.

Number Two on the ice-glimming list—and maybe even One and a Half, is the specific and *bona fide* jewel-thief, known to the "profession" as Dutch DeGroot. It was almost a sure bet that the indefatigable "Dutch" had a hand in the proceedings; but acting for whom? Also, how many stones would he lay aside for his own use?

Prize Lush

Of course, the butterfly-minded Margie isn't the only feminine member of the cast. There's Kay and Constance and the lovely Sheila, who really *should* have married Steve instead of the hard-drinking and philandering Kenneth. Speaking of hard-drinkers—you ain't seen nothin' until you get a load of Felix—the prize lush of them all. Usually it is he who has the load.

Now that we've introduced the principals in the cast of characters, let's get on with the problem. Hold on there folks! Isn't that Stephen McCloud's job? Right merrily and efficiently does he do the job too and you will find him just as ready with his fists as he is with a gun. You'll be a Steve McCloud fan in nothing flat. You'll be glad, too, we've brought Author Adams to your kind attention.

—THE EDITOR

Where Readers, Writers and the Editor Meet

The Mechanism of Mind



WHY YOU ARE AS YOU ARE—

and *What You Can Do About It!*

DID you ever stop to think *why* you do the things you do? Have you often—when alone—censored yourself for impulsive urges, for things said or done that did not truly represent *your real thoughts*, and which placed you at a disadvantage? Most persons are *creatures of sensation*—they react to instinctive, impelling influences which surge up within them and which they do not understand—or *know how to control*. Just as simple living things involuntarily withdraw from irritations, so likewise thousands of men and women are content to be motivated by their undirected thoughts which haphazardly rise up in their consciousness. *Today you must sell yourself* to others—bring forth your best abilities, manifest your personality, if you wish to hold a position,

make friends, or impress others with your capabilities. You must learn how to draw upon your latent talents and powers, not be bent like a reed in the wind. There are simple, natural laws and principles which—if you understand them—make all this possible.

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BY-LINES can be HEADLINES



*Racket-busting reporter
Gregg Lane brings in a scoop that
threatens his own scalp!*

**A Novelet
by NOEL LOOMIS**

CHAPTER I

SCRAPED FENDER

GREGG LANE sat doggedly before his typewriter in the city-room of the *Morning Herald* and tried to concentrate. The big room was ablaze with light, but Gregg was the only man in it.

He looked at the big clock. Eight-forty. It



The gang had the motorists of Johnson City at their mercy until they tried to hang a hit-and-run rap on a trouble-shooting lug!

was getting dark earlier. He looked at the yellow paper in the machine. Friday the 13th! Imagine him, Gregg Lane, writing second-year school-of-journalism features. He snorted. He didn't like doing exercises while others wrote the news.

He watched a copy-boy come in. The boy went to the big horseshoe copy-desk which now was littered with white and yellow sheets and green strips from the INS. The desk was littered but there was no one sitting around it, for the first street edition had gone down and the desk-men were out for coffee. The copy-boy went in through the open end of the horseshoe, picked up an enormous overflowing waste-basket with both hands, and took it out. The room was still again, like the gas chamber at the penitentiary. He'd rather be back at the City Hall. There things went up to a high pitch but they tapered off slowly. You had time to get used to it—maybe, even, to savor it.

Gregg looked at the sheet of paper again. Friday the 13th. Once or twice a year, and sometimes three, somebody had to write a Friday the 13th feature. He was glad 1950 had only one. Sometimes he thought he'd rather be back on the racket run, with

Toothy Fellowes and his tommy-guns on one side, and the county attorney and his gas chamber on the other.

The empty city-room made him restless. Well, not quite empty. Paul Hutton, who had the racket run now, was back, fighting out a story as he always did. Paul was a big man, an eager beaver with suspicious eyes. He was watching the re-write phone now, and keeping one eye on Gregg.

Gregg felt a little sorry for him. Every word was work for Paul, and he worried too much about what somebody else was doing—mostly Gregg.

Gregg got up. He needed some fresh air. The county attorney had warned him to stay away from the City Hall, but he could run up to Tony's across the street from police headquarters and have a hamburger. Maybe he'd see some of the boys there.

HIS car was at the curb in front of the office. He hadn't used the parking-lot since Colie ran into the lead-storm in the alley, thirty days before. He got into his car and started to pull out. There was a small, grinding bump, and he hit the brake. He pulled on the emergency and got out.



There was nothing baby-faced about Rosella as she fired again

Another man was alongside. The driver got out. He was a big man, beefy-faced and just a little too fat and too smooth, but he pulled out a notebook. "Got liability insurance?" he asked at once.

Gregg sucked in his breath. "No." Then he looked at the other car. There was a dent in the front fender about three inches long where Gregg's bumper had scraped it. Gregg breathed easier. "Have it fixed," he said, "and send me the bill. It won't be over a couple of dollars." He would have offered the fellow two or three dollars cash, but he didn't have it.

The man looked at Gregg's license-plate and wrote. Then he handed Gregg a slip of paper. He got in his own car and drove off without a word. Gregg, puzzled by the man's almost professional detachment, got in his car and started to pull out. Then he heard a siren and stopped. Squad Car 28 went by—a special "flying" squad. Gregg pulled out fast and followed.

Out at Fiftieth Street the road was lined on both sides with parked cars. Lights on. People walking back and forth. Gregg went through and parked almost a block beyond. He walked back. An ambulance was turning around. A white-coated young man straightened up. "We can't touch it," he said. "He's dead."

Murphy, from the squad car, said, "Where's he hit?"

"Back of the head," the interne said. "Almost as if he was running."

"Where did it start?" Murphy asked of another policeman who came into the light.

"Apparently hit with the left fender a couple of hundred feet back and dragged to here." He looked down. "An old man, too."

Murphy was grim. "A dirty shame," he growled.

The coroner came. The police were asking for eyewitnesses, but no one volunteered. The coroner finished his examination. "You ought to find this one," he told Murphy. "The car must be damaged, and certainly has blood on it."

"If he was hit by a car at all," said Murphy ominously. "Anyway, we'll warn the garages. If we get this one, he'll hang."

Another policeman straightened up and

pulled the sheet over the old man's face. "No identification," he reported. . . .

THERE were lights in the upper floors of the City Hall when Gregg went by. He went back to his office. He didn't turn in a story on the accident. That would come from the police reporter. The city-room was buzzing now, getting ready for the ten o'clock. Gregg sat down at his desk and stared at the sheet on Friday the 13th. He couldn't see the paper at all. He could see the old man lying there in the yellow light.

It seemed to him that the old man had had a furtive look about him.

Paul Hutton was gone—probably down at the City Hall—but Gregg kept thinking about the old man and trying to tie up the angles.

This was the seventh hit-and-run killing this year.

The next morning the governor gave Johnson City officials a tongue-lashing, and that evening somebody phoned the police and said the last two numbers on the killer's car were "07," and hung up. No name. No other information.

Gregg was still working on Friday the 13th—or trying to—when he got a call from Scotty Jameson, the managing editor. He went to Scotty's office. The managing editor was a medium-size, chunkily-built, sandy-haired man with intense dark eyes. He said, "Sit down, Lane. I want to talk over some things."

Gregg sat down. He leaned back, but he was taut.

He knew what was coming, and he relished it but he feared it.

"I've got to have a man on this so-called racket run who can figure the angles—or at least a few of them," Scotty said hopefully. "Hutton hasn't got it. Things are bad. Seven hit-and-run deaths this year—and not a single one of the killers has been caught. It isn't good, Gregg. I don't for a minute think that these deaths are premeditated, except maybe the one last night. The others, I'm sure, are just what they seem. The only thing is—how does the driver of a hit-run car get out from under? There's bound to be damage to some of those cars, and the

garages are on the watch." He looked at Gregg, waiting.

Gregg said, "The obvious answer is that there is one garage that doesn't make reports."

SCOTTY'S eyes opened a little and he nodded. "They told me you knew the angles. Now look, Gregg. I'm new here. This is my fourth month. I've heard all kinds of gossip about why you got taken off the racket run or why you resigned from it. But I've looked through the files and you're the man to crack this thing. You broke the window-washing-and-blackmail racket two years ago. Why are you writing these Halloween stories and Fourth of July junk now? That's kid stuff."

"I can tell you in two paragraphs," said Gregg.

"I'm listening," Scotty assured him, and Gregg felt a little sorry for the man. Scotty was a good m.e. He was capable. It was tough for him to hit a deal like this with nobody but Paul Hutton around to do the leg-work.

"Just about a year ago," Gregg said, remembering it for the thousandth time, "I covered a riot call on a big construction job. They were having a strike. I pulled up in time to see a man drawing bead on Sergeant Swenson. Swenson wasn't looking and I shot the man. He died, and there was an awful stink. The unions raised hell, and Hughes, the county attorney, got into it. He doesn't like the way my ears fit anyway." Gregg drew a deep breath. "Well, Hughes didn't indict me because he didn't think he could get a conviction and also because the public feeling wasn't too kind toward the unions. But I had to turn in my appointment as emergency patrolman and my pistol permit. Hughes warned me to stay away from City Hall or he'd prosecute me the first chance he got."

"Didn't the *Herald* back you at all?"

"Sure they did. No complaint," said Gregg. "The *Herald* never went for Hughes, anyway. But what could they do? My only witness, a patrolman, was killed two weeks later by an unlucky shot while he was chasing a slugger down an alley. Hughes took

advantage of that to railroad me out of the City Hall."

"Why doesn't Hughes like you?"

Gregg looked at Scotty and grinned for the first time. "Because he found his wife in my apartment." He held up one hand. "Don't get me wrong. I was having a drink in the Music Box one night when a good-looking dame gave me a very refined come-on. How did I know it was the county attorney's wife out slumming?" He said ruefully, "She carried her slumming pretty far, too." He sat back. "Well, after the shooting, I took a two-month leave of absence—without pay—to investigate my own case. I found out the man I killed was an agent of Toothy Fellowes, Johnson City's perennial racketeer. He was paid to agitate and raise a stink so Toothy could take over the building trades unions. Fellowes got out of that field after I uncovered him, but that didn't help me. I was broke and had a smashed-up car to repair. It went out of control while I was shooting and tried to climb a telephone pole."

Gregg sighed. "I went back on the desk and finally to the junk I'm on now." He drew a deep breath. "I could have gone to Milwaukee for twice as much money—which I need—but somehow I don't like the idea of being ordered out of town—which Hughes did. So—I quit going to the Music Box. I learned to eat meat loaf instead of steak," he said wryly.

"Do you like writing parade stories?" asked Scotty.

"Hell, no," said Gregg. "I hate it. I have to stick up here behind a typewriter while things are really happening around town. That's no fun."

"Then Coleman came in," Scotty said after a pause.

"Colie took my run," said Gregg. "He was good. He wasn't too proud to ask me questions and he wasn't too greedy to give me all the credit he could. Colie was a swell guy, but he got into something big and somebody sprayed hot lead over him—thirty days ago tonight."

"Do you know what it was?"

"Not definitely."

"Look," said Scotty. "Why not go on

trial for the killing of the agitator? The *Herald* will buy you the best lawyer in Johnson City. And when you're acquitted you can thumb your nose at Hughes."

Gregg stared at him morosely. "Have you ever seen a jury work? That's the biggest gamble on earth. No, sir!" He shook his head positively. "Maybe the chance of conviction is small, but it's always there. It would be my luck to draw somebody who thinks reporters are heels by nature." He shook his head again. "I've watched too many juries, and with the gas chamber at one end of the road, I'll stay as far away from a jury as I can. I've gambled with my life, but not unless I had something to say about it myself."

"Does that mean you won't take over this killing night before last, Gregg?"

Gregg sat up straight. His eyes were wide as he pretended surprise. "Who said I wouldn't?"

Scotty sat back and smiled. "That's a relief," he said. "It'll mean more money to you, too."

"I need the money," said Gregg, "but I hate Friday the Thirteenth too."

"Where will you start?"

"I'll think it over," Gregg mused. "Colie was on something hot. The switchboard girl heard 'Central Garage,' and Colie ran out and left his caution behind. I'll start from there, I guess."

Scotty looked relieved and pleased. "If you can crack this, Gregg, your by-lines will be headlines." He looked at a slip of paper. "One thing more. The old man who was killed last night hasn't been identified, but he was hit on the head before he got tangled up with the car."

"I know him," Gregg said thoughtfully. "He was a pool-hall runner for Fellows a couple of years ago when fourteen-boards were legal. If he was murdered, he probably had learned something and tried to liquidate his knowledge."

Scotty's eyes opened. "Well," he said, "you've got the jump. There's a thousand-dollar reward offered by the Safety Club for the killer, if that interests you."

"Right now," said Gregg, "any kind of cash is fascinating to me."

BLACK EYES FOR FREE



RETURNING to his desk, Gregg turned it over in his mind. His eyes shot open when he saw the mousy little man waiting for him, a man with coat and trousers that didn't match. The faded gray trousers were held up by a belt that was much too long, and the loose end of which dangled from his waist. His coat was brown and had been through rain and snow for a good many seasons but never had been pressed. His hair was black and shaggy.

Gregg sat down. "What do you want, Mouse?" he asked. He pretended to be looking for something in a desk-drawer. He didn't look up at the little man.

"I need a hundred," said Mouse Toler in a plaintive voice. "I thought maybe you could let me have it."

Gregg looked up now. He glared at the Mouse. He said, "I've given you altogether a hundred and ten within the last three months, only because Colie liked you and you gave him a tip now and then." Also, though Gregg did not add that, because he hoped the Mouse's football parlays might make some quick money. But if they had, Gregg hadn't seen it.

The Mouse whined. "We had bad luck, Mr. Lane. We shoulda made four-five hundred per cent, but the games all broke wrong. We lost too many long shots."

Gregg looked at the Mouse and hardened. "The season ran to form," he said, "and so did you. You'd double-cross your grandmother. Now get out. I'm broke. I'm worse off than you are." He slammed the desk-drawer and put his long legs under the desk. His long, thin fingers reached for the typewriter keyboard and he remembered to roll up his cuffs. It was his only white shirt and he'd have to wash it out again tonight.

But the Mouse persisted. "You knew you was backing my football tickets—"

Gregg looked at his sharp black eyes. "Are you trying to blackmail me, Mouse?" he asked ominously. "If you do, I'll twist your

scrawny neck!"

"Well, now," the voice at Gregg's side was from Paul Hutton.

Gregg snorted and sat back.

"What have you been into," asked Hutton, his suspicious eyes darting to Mouse Toler and back, "that you can be black-mailed?"

"Oh, go spin your yo-yo," Gregg snapped. He glared at Hutton until Hutton went away. Then he leaned across the desk and said to Toler, "I'm broke. You can't pry me. But I'll get you a hundred from the boss if you give me a tip on Collie's killing or this murder last night."

The Mouse said quickly, "There's a grand up for last night."

"If you've got a tip," said Gregg, "you obviously can't claim the reward—not in your shoes. But if I get the reward, I'll split fifty-fifty."

But the Mouse had a one-track mind. "How about the hundred? I need it tonight."

Gregg looked at him and smiled grimly. "Why do you need a hundred tonight?"

Mouse Toler looked embarrassed. "It's a widow," he confessed. "She's threatening to sue me for breach of promise."

Gregg laughed harshly, maybe a little cruelly.

"Let her sue. She'd never collect. You don't look the type."

"You never can tell about a jury," the Mouse said wisely, and then changed. His eyes had light in them. "If it comes out," he said, "it won't be good. She's Toothy Fellowes' girl."

Gregg considered, his eyes narrow. Finally he said, "You know how to make a hundred. Call me when you get ready to deliver." He took the sheet of paper out of his typewriter and put in a clean one, but something in the droop of Mouse Toler's shoulders held his eyes until Toler went out of sight beyond the door. Toler was emotionally in bad shape. Gregg shrugged. Maybe Toler would come through with something, if there was enough heat on him. Anyway, Gregg didn't have a hundred dollars to speculate with. He had been skipping breakfast for a month, trying to catch up with his

bills. Maybe that was why he never put any meat on his long frame.

THE next day he was up early. He had a cup of coffee and tried to ignore the smell of hot-cakes and fried ham. Mentally he credited himself with saving sixty cents. He went to the ice and sat down without taking off his coat. He had washed the shirt but the landlady had left early this morning and he couldn't borrow her iron, so he'd keep his coat on until the wrinkles smoothed out a little.

A call was waiting for him. He answered it and heard a cold-voiced young man say without preliminaries: "This is the Union Accident Insurance Company. You had an automobile accident with a client of ours, Mr. Loren Caldwell, two days ago." The voice went on as if the man was reading from a paper. "His car was—"

Gregg came out of the fog. "Who?" he asked.

"Mr. Loren Caldwell."

"You've got the wrong number," said Gregg, and hung up.

But a moment later he was listening to the same voice. "We're giving you a chance to settle this out of court, Mr. Lane."

Gregg jumped. "Out of court? Would you mind telling me what it's all about before you start suing?"

"Mr. Caldwell's car was damaged to the extent of eighty-four dollars—"

Gregg sat up straight. "Are you sure you've got the right party?"

"Didn't you pull out from the curb the other night in front of the *Herald* building and have a collision with another car?"

Gregg said, "Oh," weakly, and then stiffened. "But there wasn't any damage done except a dent in his fender about as big as my finger."

"Nevertheless," said the voice, "we told Mr. Caldwell to have his car repaired, and the bill is eighty-four dollars. We expect your check at once."

Gregg choked. "Where does it cost eighty-four dollars to have a dent ironed out in a fender?"

"We are not responsible for the amount of the bill," the voice said coldly. "We have a statement for that amount and we expect

your check at once. Otherwise we shall be forced to sue. Of course, if you have liability insurance—"

"You can sue and be damned!" Gregg shouted.

The man hung up without a word, and Gregg sat there collecting his thoughts and trying to overcome his outrage long enough to get things straightened out. Eighty-four dollars! They were bluffing.

He looked up the Union Accident and called them. It took him twenty minutes to get connected with the department that had the report on his accident. The man who had called him was "out." Gregg demanded to see the damaged car. Finally a girl told him Mr. Caldwell's address. "Of course," she said, "the car has already been repaired."

Gregg exploded. "Already?" he shouted. "They don't take any chances, do they?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured, and she sounded genuinely sympathetic. "I only work here, Mr. Lane."

"What do I do now?"

"I'm afraid you'll have to pay," she said slowly. "Aren't you the Mr. Lane who writes in the *Herald*?"

"Yes," Gregg said gruffly.

"I liked your article about Ground Hog Day," she said, but added, "I guess you'll have to pay. They all do, you know."

That was something to think about. It implied that he wasn't the first to complain—perhaps, even, that complaints were regular, and that they were made indignantly and incredulously, which in turn hinted that a lot of others were being roped in by the same tactics. "What's your name?" he asked quickly.

"Rosella Paige," she said, and then pretended to gasp. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm not supposed to give you my name."

Gregg smiled cynically. "You can give me your boss's name, can't you? The man who called me a few minutes ago?"

There was a moment's pause. Then she said, "Oh, that's Mr. Gannon."

GREGG began to wake up. Rosella wasn't dumb. She was trying to help him. "What's your telephone number at home?" he asked.

"The number is Liberty one-four-oh-five—but I'm not allowed to receive phone calls from clients, sir."

"That's okay," said Gregg lightly. "I won't call as a client."

She said, in a brisk sign-off, "I am afraid I can give you no more information, sir," and he understood that Gannon was coming near her. He said "Thank you," and hung up.

He tried to write a story. The police had not yet announced who the dead man was, but the coroner had made an autopsy and said the old man had been dead for some time before the car hit him. A public clamor was arising to find the killer. Gregg tried to write a speculative story on a small girl waiting at home for a grandfather who didn't come. He wanted to jerk tears, but when he got through he knew it would get only jeers from Scotty Jameson. It stunk. He crumpled it and tossed it into the big waste-basket.

He couldn't get Union Accident off of his mind. It made him mad, thinking about it. He looked up Loren Caldwell and called the number. A young girl answered. He asked for Caldwell. The girl said, not directly into the phone, "Mother, it's a man. He wants Daddy. What shall I tell him?"

Then an older woman's voice in the telephone, "Mr. Caldwell is not in. Will you leave your name and number?"

By now Gregg didn't think it would do any good, but he left them.

Scotty came in about noon and asked him how he was getting along. Gregg said "Fine."

He was getting the feeling that this so-called "accident" had been a lucky break. It might lead him to the big answer. But he couldn't tell Scotty that, because then the lapsing of his insurance would come out, and the owners of the *Herald*, scared of being made defendants in an injury suit, would worry him to death with their legal experts for the next week.

Gregg couldn't spare the time right now. He thought morosely he could have paid the insurance with the money he'd given the Mouse for football boards—but a man does foolish things when he wants quick money.

He started calling the list of persons who had volunteered information about the accident in which the old man was killed, but their contribution was negligible. None of them had seen it, and none of them admitted phoning the police to give the last two numbers on the killer's license plate.

He wrote another story, but it wasn't much better than the first one. Where was he going to get eighty-four dollars?

He went up to the city hall and got one of the bright young men in the county attorney's office to listen. It wasn't encouraging to find out that, as long as he hadn't signaled on leaving the curb, he probably would lose a decision in court. The young man was sympathetic. "It's tough, but people have to pay out every day because they forget to signal."

That startled Gregg. "Every day." It sounded like organized racket. Gregg asked for the names of others who had gone to the county attorney, but was refused.

He got out before he should run into Hughes.

Gregg was getting mad. Everywhere he turned was a promising lead that led straight into a blind alley. He took his car to a body shop and was told that, judging from the entire lack of damage to his own car, it was hard to see how he could have damaged any other car eighty-four dollars' worth.

The garage-man looked at Gregg pretty intently as he said, "You sure you haven't had a fender repaired lately?"

"No," said Gregg, puzzled by the look on the man's face.

Gregg called the insurance company

again. Gannon was still out, but Gregg stayed on the phone until finally he found that Caldwell's car had been repaired at the Apex Body Company. He called Apex, but it seemed that the records were mislaid and they didn't remember the job and couldn't tell him what repairs had been made. It wouldn't make any difference, anyway, they told him. That was their bill and it had been paid, and that ended it for them.

SAVAGELY determined, he went around to the Apex Body Company and demanded to talk to the man who had repaired the Caldwell car. He was told the men were not allowed to entertain visitors during working-hours. He demanded to see the records. "If I've got to pay this bill," he said, "I want to know what I'm paying for."

The man in the office was big, and he looked tough. He talked from the corner of his mouth. "Now, look, mister. I've got enough of you. We're busy around here. If you had any sense, you'd carry insurance and you wouldn't have all this trouble."

"Okay," said Gregg in a harsh voice. "I know that as well as the next dummy, but that's no reason why I should be forced to pay ten or twenty times what a job is worth."

The man's eyes began to glitter. "Don't talk so loud," he warned.

Gregg said stubbornly, "I can buy a whole new fender and running-board and have them installed for forty dollars."

[Turn page]

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"Not when the front wheels are out of line," said the big man, moving closer.

Gregg looked him in the eye. "So you do remember the job," he said.

He saw it coming but he couldn't duck. It caught him on the jaw. He fought back, but the big man smashed four hard rights into his face and slapped him off balance with a huge left hand. Then he picked him up and threw him out onto the sidewalk.

Gregg's right leg was skinned down the side. He got up and limped to a saloon and had two drinks on his empty stomach. It felt like lye-water. He went back to the *Herald* office and sat down at his desk. They looked at him. Nobody said anything, but the word got around fast. Scotty Jameson came out and came to Gregg's desk. "What happened?" he asked.

Gregg looked at him from his good eye. The other one was shut. "I came face to face with a pile-driver," he said. "The pile-driver was lying on its side. Give me twenty-five bucks for expenses."

Scotty looked at him. "I'll give you ten," he said. He slipped a bill out of his wallet and laid it on the desk. "Need any help, Gregg?" He sounded a little concerned but also a little as if he might be scared of Gregg.

Gregg said, "Find out who's the gorilla in the office of the Apex Body Company."

Scotty nodded. He started to speak, but Gregg was looking at the telephone book. Scotty went away.

CHAPTER III

ACCIDENT MILL.



AFTER thinking things over, Gregg called Loren Caldwell. Again the girl answered, and again she asked her mother, "What shall I say?" The woman spoke to Gregg. "Mr. Caldwell is out of town and won't be back until some time next week." She hung up.

Gregg looked in the directory again. Caldwell was listed as a "representative." Gregg snorted.

Then he saw on his typewriter an envelope. He opened it. A slip said, "Appear in conciliation court November 16." Gregg's jaws were tight as he slowly tore it into fine pieces and dropped them into the waste-basket. There was no longer any doubt. It was a mill—a mill for fleecing anybody who didn't have insurance. They wouldn't touch an insured car and they wouldn't claim too much on any one job. This amount was under a hundred dollars and so it wouldn't go directly into district court. Most people, facing the expense of attorneys and costs and time, would not appeal from conciliation court. If they did, there could always be a settlement out of court before it went too far.

How many were in the mill? Gannon, Caldwell and a lot of others like Caldwell to act as runners, the Apex Body Company — It was seven o'clock. He called Rosella Paige's number and asked her to have dinner with him.

She accepted. She even seemed pleased. It made Gregg feel a little better. Rosella Paige looked like the only break in a tough world.

Then Scotty came back. He had a piece of scratch-paper. "That gorilla is Sandbag Morrison," he said, "former muscle-man for Toothy Fellowes. Four years ago he got five in the big-house for assault and battery: He's been out now for six months. As far as they know, he's going straight."

"He may be going straight," Gregg said sarcastically, "but he's doing it the hard way."

"Did he give you that shiner?"

"I sure as hell didn't pay him for it," said Gregg.

Scotty didn't go away. In a moment he said, "This is getting serious, Gregg."

Gregg looked at him and tried to show disgust. "It isn't *getting* serious. It's been serious for a long time."

"If you need help," said Scotty, "let me know."

Gregg was so hungry his stomach seemed to burn in streaks. He went through the stereotype-room to the wash-room and bathed his face. He straightened his tie and tried to brush the dirt from his collar.

He looked pretty rough but he didn't have time to go home. He had a date. The black eye looked bad but he'd wear it anyway.

The stereotype room was casting the classified section. Gregg passed the big pots with their heat and the smell of scorched paper, and went back to the city-room.

The switchboard was calling him. It was Mouse Toler.

"Get me a hundred," said Mouse. "Have it ready. I'll see you somewhere about midnight. Don't wait there for me." The Mouse sounded breathless.

Gregg said, "Okay. It'll be ready. Where are you now?"

"In a telephone booth," Mouse said, and hung up fast.

Gregg went in to see Scotty. "Will you pay a hundred for information?" he asked.

Scotty raised his sandy-colored eyebrows. He reached in his inside coat-pocket and took out a small folder. He counted out five crisp twenties, and for an instant the thought went through Gregg's mind that that would pay off the insurance company.

Scotty must have seen it on his face, for he said quietly, "Be sure you get what you pay for, Gregg. This money comes hard. The accounting department still thinks criminals are tracked down with a spy-glass and a bloodhound."

Gregg raised his head and looked Scotty in the eye. "I'll get my money's worth," he said grimly.

He went downstairs to his car. That made him think about the summons, and once again, just to be sure, he walked around to look at his left front fender. He had not, so far, seen any mark on it at all, but he wanted to be sure.

The great flashing red neon sign on top of the *Herald* building made light. His eyes got used to it and then he bent down to examine the fender carefully.

BUT he didn't have to be careful. The front crown of his left fender was completely caved in. At first he was angry. Now he couldn't go into court and swear that his fender was untouched. Maybe he'd have to get a lawyer—but he couldn't afford

a lawyer. A good lawyer would cost him at least twenty-five dollars, and he might lose the case anyway. Gregg swore at the driver who must have been parked ahead of him and must have backed into his car.

Then he looked more closely. His light was broken. He frowned. He picked out a piece of broken glass with his fingers and tossed it away. His fingers felt wet. Stickily wet. At first he thought he had cut his fingers on the glass, then he began to see better.

He ran the tip of his forefinger over the fender. There was blood on it. At least his forefinger looked red. Gregg straightened up with a queer chill running down his back. There was no fooling about this. He was checkmated.

Well, they'd see, he determined grimly. In the first place, they expected him to dash out and wash the blood from the fender. In the second place, it was practically impossible to eliminate all traces of blood. He didn't think it was human blood, but could the police tell for sure after he washed it off? No, the best way was to go straight to the police.

He shook out his keys angrily. He started to get in, then thought better of it. What if it *was* human blood? What if it was the same type of blood as the old man who had been killed?

Gregg's skin began to crawl when he saw the answer to that. His car had been on the scene that night, and he could never prove he hadn't been the one who had dragged the old fellow.

Now he was stuck. He had to pay the eighty-four dollars without any argument. They had very neatly boxed him in—and yet he knew it wasn't just to make him pay the eighty-four dollars. He thought the small accident was just a coincidence. Nobody would go through all this trouble to pin an eighty-four-dollar damage suit on him.

He sat there for a minute, turning it over in his mind. There was one thing in his favor if he went to the police. They had the last two numbers of the killer's license-plate. Or did they? He sat up suddenly straight. Were those last two numbers,

phoned in anonymously, actually misleads instead of leads? Would—then a more astounding thought came. He got out abruptly and went around to the back and stared at his license-plate. A chill started at the base of his brain and went slowly down his spine as he read his own number: "399-607."

He was still standing there, trying mentally to fight his way out of the sudden smothering blanket that seemed to have dropped over him, trying to see a straight answer, when Paul Hutton came out and started across the street to the Coffee Shop. Hutton saw him standing there and looked. Then he said quickly, "The same last two numbers as the hit-run car, eh?"

He stared at Gregg. Gregg wheeled and said, "So what?"

Then he wished he had not done that, for Hutton stared at him, and a little smirk came over his face as he nodded slowly.

Gregg made a mistake then. He swung on Hutton. He swung hard. Hutton took it and backed away with his suspicious eyes on Gregg's face. He said nothing, and his silence was more terrible than anything he could have said, for plain in his face was the belief that he had found the hit-run killer.

Gregg swore. He vaulted into his car and slammed the door shut. He started the engine and gunned it away from the curb. He had to get it out of there before Hutton could see the front fender.

He was bitter as he drove home. Any jury on earth could convict him now. The prosecuting attorney would dig up a motive. Gregg Lane could go to the gas chamber on that evidence. It was true they didn't have an eye-witness to swear to the numbers "07"—but maybe at the trial one would come forward.

Somebody wanted him out of the way, the same as they had wanted Colie out of the way. But what about Caldwell? Gregg thought he knew.

CALDWELL was a beefy-faced, busy little crook who thought he had a smart racket, but this time, Gregg figured, Caldwell had picked the wrong sucker, because

he'd picked a man who was broke.

No doubt Caldwell made a business of spotting cars that were parked at the same place every day; he took their numbers and found out about their insurance. Gregg sat up straight. Come to think of it, about a week ago a woman had called him on the telephone and said she was making a survey for some insurance company. Among other questions she had asked him about liability insurance, and he had truthfully said "No." Gregg was thunderstruck when he got it all connected.

First, from his license plate number they could get his name and address. Then they ascertained that he had no insurance, and the rest was simple. Caldwell waited, double-parked, in the next block for him to come out, then he cruised up alongside and had a collision. That explained his manner, his silence. He said nothing to commit himself. Only the one question: "Have you got liability insurance?"

Gregg got home and drove into the garage. He turned on the lights, got a bucket of water and some soap, and washed the front fender. He got a flashlight out of the glove compartment and saw that there were no visible stains left. Then he went upstairs to his one-room apartment to get his pistol.

He started to unlock the door. He saw light along the door-frame. He paused. Then he unlocked the door and pushed it in while he stood back of the door-frame.

"Come in," said a voice, "and close that door."

CHAPTER IV

HIGH COST OF RACKETS



USING caution, Gregg looked around the frame at Mouse Toler. The Mouse was sitting on the edge of Gregg's bed, smoking a cigarette and helping himself to the only pint of whiskey Gregg had. He had been there some time, from the looks of the cigarette butts. Gregg slid in and locked the door behind him.

"How'd you get in?" he demanded.

"Never mind," said the Mouse. "Sit down." The Mouse's hat was off and his black hair looked thicker and shaggier than ever. "Getting in places is part of my business. I didn't hurt nothing, anyway. You got the hundred?" His voice was thick.

"I've got it," said Gregg.

"I was afraid to call you again. They're watchin' me too close."

"Who is?"

The Mouse considered. "They are," he said gravely.

Gregg counted the five twenties. He held them out. His eyes were narrow. "No phonies," he warned.

The Mouse waved. His black eyes were blurry. "Let's see that money."

He took it, while Gregg stood, tall and a little too thin, against the bathroom door. Then the Mouse handed it back. "I don't want it," he said, shaking his head. "I been sitting here thinking, and I decided to play for bigger numbers." He stared at Gregg. "I want five grand."

Gregg laughed shortly. "That woman must be riding you pretty hard," he said.

"She is," the Mouse said morosely. "She's threatening to tell Toothy about us, and I decided to get out from under. With five grand I can go to Mexico or somewhere." The Mouse drained the pint bottle and said largely, "I'll give you a tip for nothing but for five grand I'll furnish proof."

"Proof of what?" asked Gregg.

"I'll show you how these hit-run killers get away with it. Can you read books—like bookkeeping?"

"I know a little about accounting," said Gregg.

"Then," said the Mouse, "if I lead you to some books that you can read, will you pay me the money?"

Gregg laughed harshly. "You're not kidding anybody."

The Mouse fixed his black eyes on Gregg's face. "I'm not. But you are."

"Yeah?"

"If you had a busted left front fender and traces of blood on it, would you pay five grand to get it fixed without any questions?" the Mouse asked solemnly.

Gregg's eyes shot open. He swallowed hard. "What do you know about that?"

"Enough," said the Mouse. "If it's necessary I could even furnish somebody else to put the blame on."

Gregg took a deep breath. "Okay. I'll get the money. When do you want it?"

"Meet me at twelve-thirty," said the Mouse, "at the filling-station down on the corner. It'll be closed then but I'll be around."

Gregg nodded. He went over to his steamer-trunk in the corner and got his .45 automatic. The Mouse watched him load it. Gregg dropped the pistol in his coat-pocket and looked at the Mouse. "If this is a finger," he said bluntly, "somebody besides me will get killed."

He saw the Mouse swallow. In fact, he heard him. Then the Mouse said, "I'm not trying to finger you, Mr. Lane."

"Save the talk," said Gregg. "Deliver the goods tonight and you'll have enough money to go anywhere you want." He held up the five twenties. "I'm saving these. I want you sober at twelve-thirty tonight."

"I'll be sober," the Mouse said from under his shaggy black hair.

Gregg turned out the light. The Mouse went out the front way. Gregg went out the back. There wasn't any doubt. The Mouse knew. He knew plenty. He knew who had burned the blood from somebody else's fender with an oxyacetylene torch and then hammered out the fender, without reporting to the police—at a price.

IT made a picture now. A man, drunk, would hit a pedestrian. No witnesses. The driver, scared, kept going. The pedestrian died, but nobody had the killer's number. He was safe except for the damage to his car. He didn't dare drive the car and he couldn't take it to a garage. But he could make some inquiries on West Fifth Street. "They" would look him up. Pretty soon a man would contact him, and for five or ten thousand or whatever he could pay, his car would be repaired and no report made to the police.

That racket was separate from the one engineered by Gannon at the insurance com-

pany. Rather, they were parts of the same racket—dishonest and illegal auto repairing. But there was one bright spot. No smart guy would ever do an undercover job like that without keeping some record of the man who paid—for future reference. If Gregg could find that record he could break them both open. And—it was a small thing, he admitted to himself, but he'd rather see Caldwell eat dirt right now than anything. His one memory of the slick, beefy-looking face, the cold eyes, and the professional way Caldwell had pulled out his notebook, made Gregg mad.

He got his flashlight and looked around the garage, then went back into the apartment building. He found the carpenter's workshop in the basement. There was an eighteen-inch pinchbar hanging on the wall—just what he wanted. He took it and went back upstairs.

He went back to his room and called the *Herald*. "Scotty," he said, "for five thousand dollars I can blow this thing wide open."

Scotty swore. "Sell it to somebody else. You're already on the payroll and I'm not paying double for any story."

"You've got me wrong," said Gregg. "I need the money to buy information."

"I gave you a hundred tonight. Five thousand! Are you crazy?"

"No, I'm dead serious. If I come out alive, tomorrow I'll be able to write you a story that'll show how hit-run drivers get by in this county. Also a racket in connection with car accidents. And maybe even Colie's killer will come out of it."

There was a long silence. Then Scotty asked, "Are you sober?"

"Haven't had a drop," said Gregg, "—or a bite to eat. Why don't you call the county attorney? Maybe you can use marked money. All I know is that I'm on something big and something redhot. It'll break wide open tonight—win or lose. Will the *Herald* go along?"

Scotty muttered. Then he said, "I'll find out. When do you want it?"

"Within two hours."

"Come down to the shop, then. I want to talk to you before I go throwing around money like that."

"Okay," said Gregg. "One thing more. Get me a typewritten list of the dates of all hit-and-run accidents this year. See you later."

He left his coat unbuttoned. The gun wasn't too noticeable, because he was pretty thin and the coat was loose. He drove out to Rosella Paige's.

She was high class. Very black hair, a few freckles under each eye but otherwise a smooth, creamy skin, and dark eyes that really looked at a man instead of toward him. She didn't look as dumb as she had sounded that afternoon. She took his arm and walked close to him. He could feel the warmth of her hand through his coat-sleeve, and there was something about it that made him wonder. She held his arm closely but she didn't drag on it the way the baby-voiced type usually did.

They went to the Sky-room for dinner. The menu said, "Special, T-bone Steak. Prize Beef." It made Gregg's mouth water, but he restrained himself. He wanted to pour some drinks in her so she wouldn't have any trouble talking. He'd noticed she was talking plenty but she wasn't saying anything useful to him. He said, "Let's have a drink. What'll you have?"

"Tom Collins," she said brightly.

"Good for me," he said, and smiled. Then he caught himself looking into her eyes and smiled again—quickly. "Let's dance," he said.

SHE fitted up against him very well. It was a little astonishing, when you considered that he was a head taller. She was adaptable.

When they got back to the table he said, "Let's have something to eat now."

The gin had reached her face. Her cheeks were flushed. She said, "I'm having a lot of fun this way. I'd just as soon have another drink."

Which they did. Gregg remembered the menu but he drank with her. Presently he said, "Why didn't they call me before they sent that car to the garage?"

She looked at him, wide-eyed, and over her face came a dumb look that went with the voice she had used over the telephone.

On her, Gregg thought, it didn't look so good.

She said innocently, "I don't know anything about business, Mr. Lane. I heard Mr. Caldwell come in and say to Mr. Gannon that he'd had another accident, and Mr. Gannon told him to take it to the Central Garage."

Gregg thought, "This dame's as phony as they come—but what's her angle?" It made him feel a little bad, too, because he'd been thinking that when he got another white shirt he might give her a whirl. Then he realized what she had said. "Central Garage?" he repeated.

Her eyes opened wider. "That's right, isn't it?"

"Gannon told me it was repaired at the Apex Body Company."

She shrugged. "They're both the same, anyway, aren't they?"

He said, "Are they?"

She pretended innocence again. "You make it sound confusing, Mr. Lane."

He relaxed. He didn't know what her double-talk was for or what her angle was. If she wanted money for the tip, she was being plenty subtle about it. He decided to play along. "It isn't half as confusing as you are," he said in a low voice.

She laughed quietly but she looked in his eyes when she said, "You're the one who makes me confused."

There was a challenge in her eyes. Some other night, Gregg thought. Tonight's my busy night.

He looked at his watch and said he was sorry, it had been delightful, but he had a story to write for the home edition. He dropped a dollar tip and had one left for cigarettes. He took Rosella home and offered her a half-hearted kiss which turned out to be rather whole-hearted, because she didn't let go as soon as he had expected. The kiss didn't go with the dumb manner, and he wondered if she had gone out with him to find out something on her own account.

He stopped for coffee across the street from the *Herald*. His stomach was throbbing for food, and he wanted doughnuts, but it was late and they had nothing left but

coffee. He drank three cups and went up to the city-room.

He turned in the hundred, and Scotty gave him the five thousand, a flat package about half an inch thick. Gregg said he didn't want anybody to follow him. It might scare off his informant. Scotty was dubious, but Gregg was firm. "I've got a chance to blow this town wide open," he said, "and I'm not going to risk losing it."

He put the money in his pocket. He got the list of accident-dates from Scotty. He looked up the address of the Central Garage and then walked across the city-room. He turned at the door. Scotty Jameson was standing in his office, watching sourly. He doesn't care what happens to me, thought Gregg, but he's plenty worried about the folding money.

He drove back toward his apartment. It was past midnight. He drove past the filling-station. It didn't look right. He didn't know why. He went one block over and parked, then walked back. He went around the filling-station. Under the street-light his watch showed twelve-thirty. Then he heard a moan.

With his flashlight he found the Mouse at the side of the building, in a narrow, dark alley between the filling-station and the house next to it. The Mouse was whimpering as Gregg raised him. Gregg put one hand under the Mouse's shaggy black head. His hand, on the Mouse's back, felt warm blood.

"Who did it, Mouse?" Gregg asked in a low voice. "Who shot you?"

"They knew—they knew all the time," Mouse whispered. "That woman got me into it." His breath was wheezing. "That you, Mr. Lane?"

"Yeah," Gregg said tersely, and turned the flash on his own face for an instant.

"I fingered Colie," the Mouse said. "He paid me. He paid me. Cent—"

That was as far as the Mouse got. He died with Gregg's hand, sticky with blood, at his back. Gregg laid him down gently. It was then he discovered the Mouse had a tumbler-lock key in one hand. Gregg took the key and stood up, grim.

A voice at his back said, "What goes

on here, buddy?"

Gregg turned and was blinded by a flashlight. "Take it easy," said the policeman.

Gregg hesitated only an instant. He knew it was a frame.

CHAPTER V

PAYOFF IN HEADLINES



WITH a shooting already against him, a hit-and-run killing all ripe for him, and now a dead man on the ground and an unlicensed hand-gun in his pocket, Gregg Lane was on a spot. He remembered then that Paul Hutton had heard him threaten the Mouse—and he knew that he didn't dare take a chance.

He struck at the flashlight from beneath. It went up into the night air. Gregg darted past the Mouse's body into the alley-way. The policeman yelled, "Stop!" Gregg kept going. The policeman fired one shot. It burned a path along Gregg's ribs. Then Gregg was in the big alley. He ran up a few feet and darted in between two houses and cut over to the next street. He dropped the key in his pocket. A moment later he was in his car.

He cleaned the blood from his hand as he drove. The furrow along his ribs was fiery but it didn't bleed much. He drove up to West Fifth Street along the river. He stopped at the Harlem Club, an under-cover, all-night saloon. He went in. They didn't have sandwiches. Gregg spent his last sixty cents for a drink. He said to the bartender, "Where can I find Toothy Fellowes?"

The bartender looked at him blankly, but he looked for some time before he said, "I'm sure I don't know, mister. I don't even want to know."

Gregg went outside and got in the car. He drove to the Central Garage, ten blocks away. He went past and sized it up. He parked a block away, got the flashlight and pinch-bar, and walked back.

There was a dim light in the office of the garage, but there was an office beyond that,

formed by a wooden partition. Gregg went to the back. If this was Fellowes' place, there wouldn't be any burglar alarm. Fellowes wouldn't need it.

There wasn't. Gregg stopped at a window and pried off the heavy wire grating. Then he held his coat against the glass and hit it with the pinch-bar. It fell inside on a concrete floor. Gregg put on his coat and went through.

It was dark and smelled of gasoline and oily rags. He went carefully, softly, but his shoe-soles gritted on the floor. He went around cars and got to the front. He didn't stop in the outer office. He pushed open the door of the inner office and stood at one side while he shot the light in a fast arc.

The usual equipment. A flat-topped desk, somewhat littered. A small iron safe in one corner, but it wasn't large enough for much in the way of books. The Mouse had said "books." Also, the safe had no place to fit the key the Mouse had had in his hand when he died.

But there was a steel cabinet behind the desk that Gregg believed might fill the bill. He went across the rug. He thought he felt the floor give a little as he walked between the desk and the wall, but decided it was imagination. Nerves. A concrete floor wouldn't give, of course.

He used the flashlight briefly. He drew a deep breath when the key unlocked the steel cabinet.

Inside were books—a cash journal, a ledger, a check register, a cost record. But Gregg was looking for something more concise. Toothy Fellowes had been in black-mail before, and if he was doing what Gregg suspected now, he would be preserving all information that might be useful later.

There was a tin box in the rear. It was locked, but a little work with the pinch-bar opened it.

There was a small black book inside, like a memorandum book. There were forty pages of entries. He examined it in the light from the flash. The headings were by years, starting with 1946. The entries were by dates followed by numbers of five or

six figures each. They looked very much like license-plate numbers. Then in the right-hand column were amounts from fifty to several hundred dollars.

That, of course, might be nothing out of the ordinary—but why were the amounts listed under license-plate numbers instead of names?

In 1947 the items got bigger. In August there was one for \$2,000; in December it jumped to \$3,000. The organization was beginning to roll, Gregg thought.

In 1948, in January, one entry was for \$5,000. Gregg checked the date with the slip of paper Scotty had given him. The date in the book was eight days after the first hit-and-run killing in the county for 1948.

CAREFULLY Gregg went down the line. Immediately following the dates of four of the 1948 deaths, were entered sums varying from \$5,000 to \$10,000—whatever they could get, Gregg figured grimly.

He dropped the slip into the book and put the book in his coat-pocket. The small amounts probably referred to panty-waist chisellers like Loren Caldwell.

Gregg thought of that with a start. He took the book out of his pocket and went down the last page. The last entry was for \$84.00. Gregg drew a deep, satisfied breath as he cut off the flash. He dropped the book in his inside pocket and turned back to the cabinet. There must be in there somewhere a book with names and addresses opposite license-plate numbers.

He heard an unexpected sound then, like a careful step, and a sudden chill went over him. He wheeled—and then a voice in front of him said, "Freeze, Lane!"

He froze, but his light had swept the doorway and he had seen a short, dark-haired man wearing a dark-red shirt and a yellow tie. The man's front teeth protruded noticeably.

A light hit Gregg full in the face. Gregg said, in a voice that didn't sound like his own, "Who are you?"

"You know who I am and you know why I'm here and I know why you're here. Now get going."

"Where to?"

"Into the back shop."

The light motioned, and Gregg's right hand dived into his coat-pocket. It came up with the automatic, but a crunching blow smashed his forearm, and the automatic was jerked out of his hand.

Gregg spun and lashed out with his left. In the yellow light he saw the big form of Sandbag Morrison. He was as tall as Gregg but twice as heavy. He grinned and threw a huge fist into Gregg's good eye. "You didn't get enough today, I guess," he said. He tucked Gregg's automatic into his belt.

Gregg started for him, but he felt something pressing on his back. He stopped.

"Cut out the by-play," Toothy snarled. "Get going. The cops will be coming here."

Gregg, with his hands up, went out. Fellowes said to Sandbag Morrison, "I told you that pressure-plate was a good idea. We got down here pretty quick after he stepped in front of the file cabinet."

Sandbag grunted. Gregg stumbled over a doorsill into the outer shop. Sandbag's big hand picked him up and slammed him hard on his feet. Gregg said, "Where are we going?"

Toothy said, "The same place Coleman went—only this time will be more refined. The rough stuff is out."

"In front of a car?" Gregg asked promptly. He was picking his way between cars now toward the back of the shop, walking in the light of Toothy's flash. He reached an open space before a work-bench. "Get the bone," said Toothy to Sandbag.

Morrison picked up a bone about fourteen inches long. Gregg said, "What's that?"

"The thigh-bone off a cow," said Toothy. "It don't leave marks on a man's head like a blackjack, but it kills just as dead."

Morrison started to raise the bone. But he stopped. "What about the books, boss?"

"Oh, he didn't have time—say, there was a key in the lock! Do you suppose that dirty double-crosser—where'd you get that key?" he asked Gregg, and his voice was deadly.

Gregg said "Here!" and spun. He hit Toothy with both fists in the face. The flashlight dropped to the concrete. Toothy

grunted and stumbled back. Gregg spun again and ducked as Morrison's pistol went off in his face. He felt the sting of powder, but the bullet missed him.

He tried to squeeze between Morrison and the bench, but Morrison's big hands clamped around his neck.

He struggled but he didn't get loose. Whirling lights began to sparkle in the blackness. He heard Toothy yell, "Don't shoot him!" and then he was beaten over the head with something. The lights got brighter and brighter and began to whirl in streams. Then they seemed to explode in one vast detonation of yellow and red.

THE pressure on his throat was suddenly released. He was dropped to the floor and Sandbag leaped over him. The roar of a .38 filled the room and vibrated back from the tin roof. Gregg, rolling to his stomach, saw by the muzzle-flash the face of Rosella Paige and her black hair. She had a pistol in her hand, and even in that brief instant Gregg had time to note that there was nothing baby-faced about her now. She didn't have the look of a gun-moll, either. She looked like a nice young lady who was scared to death but who was doing something that needed doing.

Gregg quit worrying about her morals. Sandbag was hit in mid-air, more than once. When he went down on the other side of Gregg he went down in a pile.

Gregg, getting to his feet, was almost blinded by a muzzle-blast. He didn't hear anything because he was deafened, but the smell of burned gunpowder was strong in his nostrils. He was on his knees. He shook his head and strained his eyes, and he saw Toothy firing at Rosella.

She fired again and Gregg counted up. "She probably has only one more bullet." Then he thought frantically, "Why doesn't she move? She's out there in the open."

Toothy was behind a car, waiting for something to shoot by.

Gregg, in the dark, dived through the swirling gunpowder fumes and his right hand closed on his automatic in Sandbag's belt. Sandbag didn't protest. Gregg snatched the gun into the open and aimed

behind where Toothy should be. He fired. He didn't want to hit Toothy. He didn't dare. He had too many killings hanging over him already.

The blast startled Toothy. He fired back as Gregg flattened behind Sandbag's body. Gregg felt the body quiver when the bullets hit it. Then Rosella fired again and Gregg figured it was her last one.

Toothy fired back, but Rosella had moved. Gregg took the thigh-bone from the floor under Sandbag's hand. He got up fast. Nobody could hear any small sounds now. He crouched low and scuttled toward Toothy. He made out the silhouette, with Toothy's protruding upper teeth. He wound up and shot the pistol toward the cars behind Toothy. It hit with a crash. Toothy whirled and fired. Gregg waited an instant to be sure Rosella wouldn't fire. Toothy's back was toward him now. Toothy also was waiting for Rosella to fire.

Gregg stepped up softly and hit him hard over the head with the thigh-bone. Quite hard. Toothy collapsed very slowly.

Then Gregg sat down on Toothy's body. He got Toothy's gun and threw it across the floor. He called out, "Rosella. Turn on the lights. The skirmish is over."

Presently the lights did come on. Rosella came around the cars. Gregg grinned. "Nice going," he said. "That was a neat wing-shot of Sandbag, I—"

He still hardly heard his own words. He looked at Rosella. Her face was a ghastly white, and she started to drop.

Gregg's head was throbbing in the back, but he picked her up and put her in the front seat of a car. She wasn't hurt—only fainting. He examined Toothy and Sandbag, and thoughtfully cracked Sandbag with the thigh-bone. Then he went to the front office and called the police. About that time he began to feel weak in the legs. He went back to Rosella, sat down on the running-board, and passed out. . . .

HE CAME to in a hospital. At first he couldn't see anything. Then he remembered. "The book," he whispered. "Have we got the book?"

"We got it," said a voice.

Gregg's eyes cleared a little and he could make out Scotty Jameson.

"How'd you get here?" asked Gregg.

"In a taxi," said Scotty.

Gregg grunted. "You get the money?"

"We got it."

"What do you think of the book?"

"We've been checking it all morning," said Scotty, "while you were coming out from under a slight concussion. Toothy got away just ahead of the police and didn't know about the book or didn't have time to look for it. The book is a good find," he said. "It looks as if maybe we can dig out enough to put Toothy away for a few years. Did you find out anything about Colie?"

"I think so," said Gregg. "The Mouse fingered him, and maybe Sandbag knows who handled the gun. Toothy admitted he knew a lot about Colie's death. Yes, I think when it all gets broken open we can hang it on him. It doesn't make too much difference anyway. There will be enough charges of compounding a felony in connection with hit-and-run killings to keep him

put away for the rest of his life. Say—" He looked at Scotty. He could see him clearly now. "You say Toothy got away?"

"Yes, but the police picked him up as he got off a plane in Chicago this morning. Sandbag is in the hospital."

"Where's Rosella?" asked Gregg.

She came into his sight then. Very black hair, nice build, he noticed now, and smooth skin with freckles under the eyes. No, she didn't look dumb at all. She didn't sound dumb, either. Even her voice had changed. It wasn't high and juvenile as it had been. Now it was low and soft as she said, "Glad to see you sitting up, Gregg."

He stared at her. "What's your angle?"

"I was working for Colie when he was killed," she said, softly. "He knew Gannon was in on it and I was finding out how. I think I did." Her voice went even softer. "How do you feel, Gregg?" There was a little anxiety there too, he decided.

"Hungry," he said. "You want to have dinner with me tonight—if I can get an advance?" He looked at Scotty.

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Croff's hand came up with a gun in it

Murder Buttoned Up

By BENTON BRADEN

HARRY DODGE sat in the living room of his small but comfortable apartment. Harry was a nice-looking lad, twenty-six, ordinarily light-hearted and cheerful. But now he was frowning. It seemed to Harry that he had had more than his share of bad luck in the past six months.

In the first place, he had lost his job

through no fault of his own. Now he was down to his last few dollars. He was going to have to leave this apartment in a few days, because he wasn't going to be able to meet the rental payment at the first of the month.

He had to admit that it had been foolish of him to lease the apartment in the first place. Harry had taken it on an impulse

Button, button, who lost the button—next to a corpse!

when he had thought that he was going to be married. He hadn't even proposed to the girl, but he was sure that he would pop the question later. Things had been going smoothly with Harry and Betty. He had just assumed that they would drift into marriage, and it wasn't every day that he'd get a chance to rent a nice little apartment like this one.

Then this Matthew Burke had appeared on the scene and started dating Betty. Burke was older, about forty, but he had dough. In a few weeks Betty Stowell had married Burke, and Harry had been left high and dry with an apartment that he no longer needed. He had signed a year's lease and had intended to keep his contract, but that was out of the question now. He'd have to get out and hunt a cheap room somewhere.

Harry glanced at the clock on the table. It was ten P. M. He was reaching for the radio when the knocks came at the door. He rose, crossed the room, opened the door. Three husky men walked into the room without any invitation from Harry. Harry was so surprised that he could only step back and stare at them.

"You're Harry Dodge, aren't you?" The question came from the taller of the three men. He had an impassive, square-jawed face.

"That's right," Harry replied sharply. "What's the idea of strong-arming your way in here like this?"

THE tall man scowled. "You'll find out, my friend," he said. "I'm Sergeant of Detectives Clark. I'm going to ask you a few questions. I'll explain later—if any explanations are needed. Where did you spend this evening?"

"Right here in this apartment," Harry replied. "I got home at seven and haven't been out since."

"You have anybody to verify that statement? Anybody been in to see you this evening?"

"No." Harry's eyes showed worry. He couldn't imagine why detectives should be asking him questions like this. He had never been in trouble of any kind. He could sense

that there was no friendliness in the attitude of the three men who faced him. They were looking at him as though he were a confirmed criminal.

"I understand you used to go with a girl named Betty Stowell, now Mrs. Matthew Burke," Sergeant Clark pursued. "That right?"

Harry hesitated an instant, then said, "Yes."

"You were pretty thick with her, weren't you, Dodge? Rented this apartment with the idea of living here with her after you were married, didn't you?"

Anger flamed in Harry's eyes at that question. "That's none of your damned business!" he flared.

"Don't be too sure about that, Dodge," the sergeant said softly, smiling a little. "You'd be surprised at the little items that we make our business sometimes. Yes, you were going to marry Betty Stowell. It was all set, or you'd never have rented this apartment. About that time this Matthew Burke came into the picture. Burke had money. Supposed to be worth a couple of hundred thousand. Everybody took it for granted that Betty threw you over and married Burke for his dough. Well, I don't doubt that she was after his dough. The question is now, did she really throw you over? Or was the play a little deeper than that?"

"I wish you'd tell me just what you're driving at," Harry said bitterly. "I was going with Betty Stowell. Burke came along and married her. That let me out. I'm not interested in either of them any more. I never expect to see either of them again."

"Well, you won't see Burke any more," Sergeant Clark said. "At least you won't see him alive. He died very suddenly tonight—if it's any news to you. That's what we're here for, Dodge. To see if it is news to you."

Harry's mouth dropped open, and he could only stare at them. Matthew Burke was dead. Murdered, or these cops wouldn't be here asking questions like this. But why should they have come to him, be asking questions like this? He hadn't seen either Betty or Burke since they were married. He couldn't possibly be involved.

"So you're going to play the part out, are you, Dodge?" the sergeant said. "You don't know a thing about it. Well, we'll see. Matthew Burke was murdered tonight. Murdered in his own garage. Found dead in his car. The garage was filled with carbon monoxide fumes. Our guess is that the killer started out to make it look like a suicide, waylaid Burke when he drove into the garage. But the killer had a little trouble. Burke fought. We don't know just what happened except that there was a battle while Burke fought for his life. He lost. In the end he died from the fumes while sitting beneath the wheel of the car. But that fight upset the killer's plan to make it look like a suicide. You still insist that you haven't been out of this apartment tonight, Dodge?"

"I told you before I hadn't," Harry answered.

"Well, we don't want to jump to conclusions, so I won't call you a liar—yet," Sergeant Clark said. "With all the clues we've got, this ought to be an easy case to break. That the same suit you've had on all evening, Dodge?"

"Yes. I've worn it all day."

"You've got some other suits, haven't you?"

"Yes. I have two others."

"I don't suppose you'd mind letting us take a look at your other clothes, would you?"

"No," Harry replied. "I don't care what you look at. But I wish you'd tell me where I come into this. I never saw Matthew Burke but once in my life. I've never seen either him or Betty since they were married. Now I can see that you have an idea that I might have had something to do with his death. That's ridiculous."

"Not too ridiculous." The sergeant shook his head. "It's logical to figure that you did. Your story is that Burke beat your time with Betty. But we're not so sure about that. You rented this apartment with the idea of living here with Betty, so things must have been all set between you. But it could be that you and Betty got a quick-rich idea in your heads. Maybe you told her to go ahead and marry Burke, live with him a few months to make it look good."

SERGEANT CLARK never took his eyes from Harry's face. "It's been six months since she married Burke, hasn't it?" he went on. "Now he's dead. I understand that Betty will get about half of the estate, that he didn't leave any will. That will net her about a hundred grand. So Betty could wait a few months till everything quieted down, then marry you and start off where you quit before. That would net you a nice sum for your trouble—if you got away with it. You don't think that we can prove that you were out of this apartment tonight. We'll see about that. Let's see the rest of your clothes."

"I'll have to admit you have some imagination, Sergeant," Harry said, and he smiled a little, "to think up a motive like that for a murder. It's so far-fetched that it's almost funny. In the first place, you've got Betty Stowell all wrong. Maybe she did fall for the easy-life picture that Burke painted for her. Maybe she did throw me over for a soft spot. I guess she used good judgment, at that, because I haven't even got a job now and wouldn't be able to support her if she had married me. But Betty is a pretty nice kid, and you couldn't convince me that she was a killer if you'd found her over Burke's dead body with a knife in her hand."

"That's just about what Betty said about you, Dodge," the sergeant admitted. "But that may be just part of the act. All killers protest their innocence long and loudly—at first. If you're innocent you've got nothing to worry about. Now let's see those clothes."

Harry led them back to his bedroom, opened the closet door, removed the two suits hanging there and laid them on the bed. The sergeant leaned over the bed and looked at the suits while Harry and the other two cops looked on. The sergeant took one of the coats and lifted it, inspected it closely.

But Harry wasn't watching the sergeant. Harry was looking at his other suit that still lay on the bed. That brown suit had been returned to him freshly cleaned and pressed the night before last. But the suit didn't look fresh now. It looked like it had been slept in—and worse. It was badly wrinkled and Harry could see grease spots

on it. That suit had been worn by someone, or else someone had deliberately tried to make it appear like it had been worn.

Harry knew right there that these questions the sergeant had been asking couldn't be laughed off as "ridiculous." Someone had got into his apartment and "fixed" that suit. That was part of a frame—a frame for the murder of the Matthew Burke.

The sergeant dropped the first suit on the bed and picked up the coat of the brown suit. He looked at the buttons very carefully, and his eyes suddenly glinted. He tucked the coat under his arm and picked up the trousers and vest.

"Well, now, I think I'll just take this suit along with me," he said casually. "I see you've used this suit pretty hard, Dodge. It's got some grease spots on it. May not mean a thing, but we'll look it over later when we have time."

"You think I left this apartment tonight," Harry said grimly. "You think I wore that suit, went to Matthew Burke's garage, waylaid him as he drove in and somehow managed to hold him until he was unconscious from the fumes."

"We're not jumping at any conclusions," the sergeant said, almost silkily, as though he were apologizing for his words and actions. "We just want to look more closely at this suit. You take those grease spots, for instance. We might be able to find out whether or not that grease came from the Burke garage. I wouldn't know. It would take experts to find out. If you're innocent you've got nothing to worry about."

"You're not—arresting me for the murder?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Of course not," Sergeant Clark said smoothly. "I make it a rule never to arrest anybody in a case like this till I've got it air tight. I haven't got this case air tight yet. Not quite. At the same time, Dodge, you better stick around. It might be a good idea for you not to go out tonight. We might want to ask you some more questions later. We'll go on back to headquarters now."

The sergeant and his two men went back into the living room and on out through the door without another word. Harry stood in the center of the room and stared after

them. He hadn't been fooled by the sergeant's careless, almost apologetic manner. The sergeant was sure now that Harry had killed Matthew Burke.

That brown suit! The sergeant hadn't said a word, but he couldn't have missed what Harry had seen at first glance. That was Harry's best suit and he had kept it in perfect condition. But now the top button on the front of the coat didn't match the other two. Someone had jerked the top button off and sewed on another one, one that didn't quite match. That original button was now planted in the Burke garage and the sergeant was going back to look for it—and he would find it where the killer had planted it. That would be all the evidence that the sergeant, or a jury, would need. It would be enough to send Harry to the chair.

Then they'd grill Betty! And the killer would probably have planted evidence somewhere to involve Betty. The killer would have to do that to make the motive stand up. They'd try to force a confession from Betty before they finally came to arrest him.

HARRY suddenly felt as though he were caged. He would be caged in a matter of hours. He'd be in a cell with no chance to prove his innocence, expose the frame. He had to get out of this apartment before the sergeant came back. Of course, the sergeant hadn't left him here without some sort of a guard

Harry opened his door, went along the hall to the front where there was a window that looked down on the street from this third floor. Sergeant Clark had left one of his cops there in front of the building to make sure Harry didn't leave. Harry was sure that the other cop had been posted at the rear of the building to watch that exit.

He went back to his bedroom, hurried to his window, looked down. He saw the familiar sight of the metal roof of a one-story building below him. From that moment on Harry acted in near panic. He worked swiftly, moved by an overwhelming urge to get out of the building and away from those waiting cops.

He went to his bed, pulled off the sheets, tore them into wide strips, twisted them,

tied the ends together until he had a make-shift rope. He pulled the bed over to the window, tied the end of his rope to the leg of the bed. He went to his dresser, pulled out a drawer, took from it a gun and dropped it into his pocket. Then he pulled up the lower sash of the window, threw the rope out, slid over the sill and went down hand over hand. At the last, he had to drop only two feet to the metal roof.

That building was about fifty feet wide. Harry had the faint light from his own window above to guide him as he moved across the roof to the far side. He worked his way to the rear wall of the building and looked down. It was dark there, and he couldn't see just how long a drop it would be. That cop at the rear of his apartment building couldn't be over seventy-five feet away.

Harry lowered himself over the edge of the rear wall until he was clinging to the top ledge by his finger tips. He pushed his body out a few inches with his knees and let go. He landed hard on concrete. He crouched there, listening and watching. There was no sign that he had been heard. He turned to his right and hugged the wall until he reached the lighted street at the end of the araway. He walked fast for three blocks, then caught a bus and rode across the city.

A few minutes later he was sitting at a small table in a dimly lighted and rather shabby tavern. The excitement of his flight was leaving him and he was able to think more clearly. He put his right hand in his pocket and felt the gun there. He grinned a bit sheepishly. That had been a foolish move, grabbing that gun. If the cops picked him up now with that gun on him it would be just one more thing to explain. And he remembered that there were no cartridges in the weapon.

But the cops wouldn't be able to pick him up quickly. They wouldn't be able to get a picture of him, and there weren't more than fifty people in the city who would recognize him. He'd have at least a few hours in which to try to prove his innocence. If he could only manage to get in touch with Betty and get her story, he'd be able to find a starting point. If she were at home, guard-

ed as he had been, she might be able to talk over the phone and tell him—

Harry's thoughts were interrupted as the bartender turned up the radio behind the bar for the final newscast of the night. First there was the usual weather report. Then Harry listened intently to the words that followed:

"Matthew Burke, president of the Burke Hardware Company, was found dead in his garage at his home tonight. He had been overcome by fumes from his car which was still running. First reports were that it was an accident or suicide. But now the police are convinced that it was murder. The police found that there was evidence of a struggle, that Burke had fought for his life before being overcome and placed beneath the wheel of his car to die of the deadly carbon monoxide gas. Mrs. Burke, his bride of six months, found the body in the garage and summoned the police.

"Peter Groff, nephew of Matthew Burke and his only blood relative, was called to the scene and could offer no explanation for the murder. Groff said it was his understanding that his uncle had made a new will recently, leaving his whole estate to his wife. Betty Burke confirmed this statement.

"Police have questioned a former suitor of Mrs. Burke. They have examined the clothing of this man, whose name they will not at this time reveal. They say they have an important clue. In the death struggle in the garage Burke apparently tore a button from the coat of his assailant. The button was later found where it had skidded beneath a tire of the car. Evidently the killer had searched for this button, but in his excitement and panic had been unable to find it.

"The police say that a button had been hastily sewed on a coat found in the former suitor's apartment. But the button did not match the other buttons on the coat, and it had been crudely and hastily sewed on.

"Flash! We have just been informed that the police have discovered that a button, similar to the one substituted by the former suitor, is missing from a coat of Matthew Burke. The coat was found rolled up in a

laundry hamper. The police feel that they have broken the case wide open, as Mrs. Burke had already stated that she had been alone in the house all evening. When confronted with that coat with the missing button, Mrs. Burke collapsed.

"The swift action of the police has broken this case wide open in a matter of a few hours. It seems obvious that this former suitor of Mrs. Burke was waiting for Burke when he drove into his garage. The killer intended to set it up as a suicide. But Burke fought and upset that plan.

"The police are now grilling Mrs. Burke, trying to get a confession from her. She, of course, is unable, or perhaps unwilling is the better word, to explain how that missing button from her husband's coat was transferred to the coat of her former suitor.

"The police have just announced that the name of Betty Burke's former suitor is Harry Dodge. He managed to elude detectives and is not in custody, but the police expect to pick him up in a matter of hours."

AS THE announcer went on to other topics, Harry stared at the bottle of beer in front of him. The whole frame was clear now. The real killer had never intended to set Burke's death up as a suicide. His only purpose had been to kill Burke and set up vital clues pointing to Harry and Betty.

The cops, of course, would assume that Betty had been right with Harry when Burke had driven into his garage. Burke had managed to tear that button from Harry's coat. Betty and Harry hadn't been able to find it. Betty had run into the house and got a button somewhat like it from one of Burke's coats. Probably she had sewed it on right there. Then Harry had gone home and changed suits. They hadn't thought that the cops would ever suspect Harry. Yes, the frame was plain enough now. But proving that it was a frame might be very difficult.

The real killer was this nephew, Peter Groff, Harry thought. If Betty were tabbed for the murder she couldn't inherit from Burke, will or no will. Then Groff, as the only relative, would come in and take the

whole estate.

Harry waited a few minutes, then walked to the telephone booth and looked through the directory. He found the name of Peter Groff. 3756 Linden Avenue.

Fifteen minutes later he stood before the door of a third floor apartment. His face was grim, desperate. He was glad he had that gun in his pocket now. It was unloaded, but Groff wouldn't know that. Harry didn't have any plan—except to force the truth from Peter Groff.

He knocked on the door, waited a moment, then knocked again. The door opened. The young man who stood there was about twenty-five, stockily built, had light hair. His eyes were a watery blue.

"Police," Harry announced. "I'd like to ask you some more questions, Mr. Groff."

"I told you everything I know," Groff said surlily. "However, come in."

Harry went in, kicked the door shut behind him. They were in a rather large living room. There was a table in the center of it. Groff retreated to the other side of the table and sat down in a wide chair.

"What is it you want to know?" he asked very casually.

"The truth!" Harry said.

Groff's eyes widened in surprise, and Harry thought he detected some alarm in them. "I've already told you the truth," Groff said hoarsely. "I really don't know anything about the case, the murder. I'd been home here all evening until I was called to come over to my uncle's home. It was the first time I had been there for a month. My uncle's wife verified that statement. I just heard over the late broadcast that a button had been found missing from one of Uncle Matthew's coats. I should think that would cinch the case.

"Betty said that there had been no one else in the house all evening," he continued hurriedly. "She and this Harry Dodge plotted the murder. Only they bungled it and got caught. She got that button from one of my uncle's coats and either gave it to Harry Dodge or sewed it on herself. They can't get around that. She swears she was the only one in the house all evening. No one else could possibly have removed that but-

ton from Uncle Matthew's coat."

"There is some evidence that that button was removed from Mr. Burke's coat before this evening," Harry said coldly. "Just as there is some evidence that someone got into Harry Dodge's apartment and sewed that same button on his coat. It could very easily have been done at any time today—if the whole thing was framed."

"But who—who would have framed it?" Groff stammered.

"You would, Groff. If the murder is pinned on Betty, you take the whole estate."

"That's preposterous!" Groff almost shouted. "There's no proof of any kind that I had anything to do with it."

"There's plenty of proof, Groff," Harry said harshly.

"What—what proof? There's not a thing to connect me with any frame. Who says—who is accusing me?"

"I am," Harry said, as he whipped the gun from his coat. "I say that you killed your uncle, Groff. Killed him and framed Betty and me for the murder. You found out that I had gone with Betty before your uncle married her and that—"

"You're not a cop!" Groff screamed. "You're—you're Harry Dodge!"

"That's right, Groff. I'm Harry Dodge. Now you're going to tell the truth, or I'll use this gun on you. You'll either admit you killed your uncle in that garage and planted the evidence on me, or I'll put a bullet through your head."

At that moment Harry wished that the room had been full of cops. Groff's contorted face would have convinced them of his guilt. His face was white, taut with hatred and fear and guilt. But there was something else in his face that Harry overlooked. Desperation! Groff was convinced that Harry had come there to kill him. Harry had let his own gun drop to his side, believing that Groff was so overcome with terror that he couldn't speak or move for the moment.

Groff was in deadly terror right enough. But that didn't prevent him from moving. His hand moved toward the table. A drawer was partly open there. Groff's hand

came up with a gun in it.

Harry had plenty of time to see that gun coming up. He raised his own gun. But now that gun, empty of cartridges, was useless—while he had no doubt that Groff's gun was loaded.

Harry acted instinctively. With a quick motion he raised his arm and hurled his gun at Groff. Groff threw up his arms to protect himself from the missile. There was nothing left for Harry to do but run for it. He made for the door, got it open.

GROFF'S gun roared as he went through the door. Harry felt a sharp sting in his left arm. Groff fired again, but Harry was out of sight by that time. It seemed to Harry that Groff had lost his head and was still shooting as he went down the stairs. It seemed that Groff had fired many shots, but Harry concluded that it was only echoes that he had heard.

Harry knew he had to get away from that district in a hurry. Groff would undoubtedly call the police and tell a harrowing story of how Harry had come to his apartment to kill him after he realized that he had failed in his murder coup. The cops would be really scouring the town now. He wouldn't be safe in any hotel or rooming house. Where could he go? He had no friends that he would dare trust in a situation like this.

He stepped into a dark doorway and tried to think. His situation was really desperate now. He thought of Betty. His actions hadn't improved her position. The cops would be confronting her with this last episode, pounding her for a confession. There wouldn't be a chance on earth to get a phone call through to Betty now. But those thoughts led Harry to a new idea.

Betty's brother, Bill Stowell! He and Betty had been out to Bill's house several times in the evening. Bill Stowell would never believe that his own sister was guilty of plotting a ruthless murder like this. Believing that his sister was innocent, he'd also have to believe that Harry had been framed.

Harry walked a block and caught a bus. Forty minutes later he stepped up on the

stoop of a small cottage. There was a light in the window. Bill and Marge Stowell had been too upset to go to bed this night.

Bill Stowell opened the door at Harry's knock. "Harry!" he exclaimed. "Come in."

"Thanks, Bill," Harry said, as he entered the small living room. "I guess I'm a fugitive from justice—a real hot one. I figured that this was the only place in the city where I'd get anything like a cordial reception."

"You're right about that, Harry," Bill Stowell said soberly. "I know that Betty had nothing to do with Burke's death. So you were framed, too. But I don't know what we're going to do about it. The evidence seems to get worse and worse."

"I didn't help things any, Bill," Harry admitted. "I got a wild idea that I could make Peter Groff talk. I went to his place and—"

"I've heard about it," Bill broke in quickly. "I've got a friend who's a detective. He's on duty at headquarters tonight. He phoned me awhile ago and said that you had gone to Groff's apartment and tried to kill him. He said that you must have been a rotten shot because you hadn't hit Groff once."

"I didn't even shoot at him," Harry denied. "My gun wasn't loaded. I threw my gun at him. He did all the shooting."

"That's not the way Groff told it. He said it was a regular gun battle. That you came to his apartment pretending to be a police officer. That after you got in you pulled a gun and said you were going to kill him. Groff said he kept a gun in a drawer of his table and managed to get it in his hand. He said you shot at him several times before you fled, that he kept ducking around and dodging and that you didn't hit him. He said he thought he hit you once. But you're not hurt, are you, Harry."

"Not much," Harry said. "I think he got me through the flesh of my left arm."

"Let's take a look at it," Bill said quickly, and he helped Harry slip out of his coat and rolled up the left sleeve of Harry's shirt. Marge Stowell came into the room at that moment and gasped when she saw the wound

in Harry's arm.

"We'll have to call a doctor right away!"

"Nothing doing," Harry cut her off. "A doctor would call the cops right away, and that would finish me. And make it mighty tough on you, too. This is just a scratch. A little iodine and a bandage will hold it for a while, at least."

Marge hurried from the room, came back with iodine and gauze a minute later. She applied the iodine and bandaged the arm neatly.

"There is one thing about this whole case that has me stymied," Harry said. "I know Groff killed his uncle. But Betty said she had been alone in the house all evening. Apparently she also said that Groff hadn't been in the Burke house for some time. Yet somebody tore a button from one of Burke's coats, and it must have been done sometime during the day. Betty didn't do that. Who did? Who else would have had a chance to do it? Did Betty have a maid?"

"Not exactly a maid," Marge Stowell said. "But I've been by to see Betty many times, and I know the setup there. Before Burke married Betty, this nephew, Peter Groff lived with him. They had a housekeeper, full time. Betty decided she didn't want a full-time housekeeper, but she did want some help. So this woman comes several times a week to help her for half a day. Her name is Mrs. Schumm. Her first name is Edna. She's a widow."

BILL nodded. "There's the answer," he said excitedly. "This Edna Schumm and Peter Groff got to know each other well, during the years Groff lived with his uncle. Groff got her to help him on the promise of a big bonus when he got his uncle's estate. And Groff worked for his uncle in the hardware concern. So it was easy for Groff to get a key that would unlock your apartment door."

"Edna Schumm tore that button from Burke's coat this morning," he continued. "She passed it to Groff, and he got into your apartment later when you were out. Then all they had to do was murder Burke tonight and do a crude job of it, make it look as though it had been a bungled attempt

to fix it as a suicide. Now they're sure that no one will ever be able to prove the truth."

"Maybe not," Harry said. "But Groff has made one bad mistake. I want to see this Edna Schumm right away. She's the weak link, and I might be able to break her. Her address probably won't be in the phone directory. But it'll be in a city directory. Will you drive me, Bill?"

"Sure, I'll drive you," Bill said promptly. "But suppose Edna Schumm is tough. She'll call the cops, and you'll be in a worse spot than ever."

"We'll beat her to it," Harry said. "I'm about at the end of my string, anyway. I might as well gamble. We'll call the cops, get them there right after I get into her apartment. Have you got a stick of chewing gum, Marge?"

"Yes," Marge said. She went to a table, got her purse, handed Harry a package of chewing gum. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Jam a lock, Marge," Harry smiled. "We'd better get going right away."

Ten minutes later Bill Stowell came back to his car from an all-night drugstore. "Got her address," he told Harry. "Twenty-seven fifty-three Stanton Street. That's only about a ten-minute drive from here."

Bill crawled in beneath the wheel, drove to Stanton Street, parked just beyond the address. Harry pointed to the lighted district two blocks ahead.

"You go up there and find a phone, Bill," he directed. "Call headquarters. Try to get Sergeant Clark." He gave Bill specific instructions for about two minutes. "Remember," he said finally, "to tell them to come up Stanton from the south, lay off the sirens—and give me a break."

Harry watched Bill's car until he saw it pull up to the curb far up the street where the lights were. A few minutes later he walked up the entrance to 2753 and waited there. At last he turned and went up a flight of stairs fast. He went down the hall to a door, saw with satisfaction that light was coming from beneath the door. He knocked loudly. He waited a few seconds, was about to knock again when the door

opened an inch. Harry put his foot against the door so that it couldn't be closed on him.

"I'd like to talk to you, Mrs. Schumm," he said.

"What about?" He couldn't see but a small section of her face, but her voice was heavy.

"About the murder of Matthew Burke."

To Harry's surprise she opened the door wide at once. He guessed that she thought he was an officer. Harry moved in, then as Edna Schumm retreated before him, he turned and closed the door rather slowly with his back against it.

Edna Schumm was a very large woman. She was tall and she must have weighed more than two hundred pounds, and there wasn't too much fat on her. She had big shoulders and big arms. Her face was rather square, and showed no emotion as she looked at him. Her hair was thin, pasted flat against her head.

Harry glanced quickly at the room. It was large, sparsely furnished, but clean. There was a door behind her that seemed to lead into a hall.

"I understand that you worked for the Burkes, Mrs. Schumm," Harry said. "You worked at the Burke house this morning, didn't you?"

"That's right, Mr. Dodge."

Harry couldn't conceal his surprise as she uttered his name. Edna Schumm smiled a little. "I heard a very good description of you broadcast over the radio, Mr. Dodge. I recognized you at once. Now it's very late, so I suggest you get right down to facts. I know the police want you very badly for the murder. I know that you would like very much to pin the murder on someone else. Peter Groff, for instance. Or even me. But it's no dice, Dodge. You cooked your own goose when you went to Peter's apartment and tried to kill him. Now I suppose you've come to try to kill me."

"You've got it wrong, Mrs. Schumm," Harry said steadily. "I think I did a very smart thing when I went to Groff's apartment, although I didn't realize it till later. Groff has a great imagination. He used it in planning this murder of his uncle and

framing Betty and me for it. Of course, I know the truth, know the button was planted—and I am quite sure that you are the one who tore the button from Matthew Burke's coat this morning and gave it to Groff so he could plant it on one of my suits in my apartment.

"Yes, Groff has a great imagination," Harry repeated. "He used it when I confronted him this evening. It seemed like a bright idea to him, at the time, to fire a lot of shots, make it appear as though he had had a gun battle with me. Of course, he didn't find out till later that my gun wasn't even loaded. So if the cops ever check the bullets in that apartment they'll find that they were all fired from one gun."

EDNA SCHUMM'S eyes narrowed to slits. "That is all very interesting, Mr. Dodge," she said.

"And there is another little thing," Harry told her. "A nice little point that your friend, Peter Groff, overlooked. When he fired those shots he failed to realize—"

"Don't tell me," she interrupted. She suddenly smiled broadly and took a step toward Harry. "I think I know what your point is. And I can assure you that it is going to be taken care of—right now!"

She hunched her shoulders and drove at Harry. He was so surprised that he couldn't move before her hands were on his throat. Powerful hands, they were, that seemed to close on his flesh with an iron grip.

"Yes, I know!" she yelled. "The damn fool didn't stop to think that if you went to the cops and they tested your hand, it would show that you hadn't fired a gun. But we're going to fix that right now. Your hand will show that you fired a gun—after you're dead. The cops can test your hand then all they want to. I'll tell 'em you tried to kill me, and I shot you dead in self defense."

Peter Groff had come from that door that led to the rear as Edna Schumm had spoken those words. Groff had a gun in his hand.

"Kill him, Groff!" Edna bellowed. "Shoot

[Turn page]



oh-oh, Dry Scalp!

"HE'S GOT LADDIE BOY in check all right, but not Dry Scalp. My, what unkempt hair! Looks like a mane . . . and I'll bet it's as hard to comb. Loose dandruff, too. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic!"



Hair looks better...
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IT'S GREAT! Try it! See what a big difference 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic makes in the good looks of your hair. Just a few drops daily check loose dandruff and those other annoying signs of Dry Scalp . . . spruce up your hair quickly and effectively. Contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients.

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Listen to DR. CHRISTIAN,
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
on CBS Wednesday nights.

him in the side while I hold him. We'll fix things later."

Peter Groff tried to come around and level his gun at Harry's left side. But Harry had thrown his arms around Edna. He was able to pull her about and keep her between him and Groff. "Get him!" Edna shrieked. "I can't hold him forever."

Harry got his right foot up and kicked Edna hard in the shin. She cried out and her fingers loosened on his throat a little. Harry used all his strength, turned her huge body, charged straight at Peter Groff with her. Groff lost his head and tried to get in a shot at Harry. Edna yelled in pain as the bullet caught her in the hip.

Then cops were piling into the room. "All right, Dodge," Sergeant Clark called out. "We'll take over."

"You've raised a lot of hell tonight," Clark told Harry, after the detectives had put cuffs on Groff and Edna Schumm, "but I guess it paid off. But I wasn't so taken in by that setup as I pretended. If I had been I'd have pinched you on the spot.

"The weak spot in their plan was their attempt to involve Betty," he explained. "They had to tie her in to collect. But I figured that if you and Betty had actually killed Burke in his garage, she would never have bothered to get a button from her husband's coat. All you would have been interested in would have been in getting away from there fast. You could have easily ditched that coat somewhere before we had time to get to you. But I'm glad you acted as you did, because we might have had trouble proving that it was a frame. As it is, we heard plenty."

"I'm glad you gave me a chance," Harry said gratefully. "Glad you didn't come in before I had a chance to get things rolling."

"Your friend, Stowell, was there to meet us when we came in," Clark smiled. "He told us that you would put gum in the lock to keep it from clicking shut, that you'd try to leave the door open a little so we could hear. Stowell was pretty firm with us. He said he'd mop up the whole squad of us if we didn't give you the chance to put the screws on Edna Schumm and make her talk.

"I'll say one thing for Edna," he concluded. "She's no fool. She was smart enough to know that Groff had pulled a big boner in staging that supposed gun battle. So Edna got right down to tacks and went to work on you, but all she got for her trouble was a slug in the hip."

"Which proves, together with the fact Groff only nicked me in the arm earlier in the evening, that he's a mighty poor shot for a cold-blooded killer," Harry said.

"By the way," Sergeant Clark said, "the other girl in this case—and a right brave one she is, too—is going to be mighty interested in this outcome of things, since she never once wavered in her insistence that you were innocent. I should drop around right now and tell her, but if you haven't anything better to do—"

"Nothing better in this world," Harry said, and grinned broadly as he took the arm of Betty's brother, Bill Stowell, and turned him toward the door. "You heard the man, Bill, so let's be on our way—and don't spare the horsepower."

NEXT ISSUE—A NOVEL OF FAST CARS,
FASTER WOMEN AND FABULOUS JEWELS!



•
WHAT PRICE MURDER

A Book-Length Stephen McCloud Thriller

By **CLEVE F. ADAMS**

SILENT VIOLENCE

By
R. VAN TAYLOR

*It takes two to make an
argument—or a murder!*

NOW don't get me wrong—I like my job as a bartender. You get to talk with all kinds of people and learn to read them like a book. You can tell what their business is, if they're married, if they're happy or blue, and if they've got any dough. Why, you can even separate the Republicans from the Democrats before they open their mouths. It's an education.

The only thing you can't tell is whether or not a guy's a murderer.

I work in a classy bar out in the residential section of town. During the war we did a good business, but now it's dropped off to practically nothing and the boss says that if it doesn't improve he's going to close the joint next month.

That okay with me. I could use a vacation. Besides, I'm a little squirmish after that deal last night.

It was about eight-thirty and there wasn't a soul in the place. By this time five years ago there wouldn't have been a dry bar towel in the joint. Now they were all clean and stiff and neat, just like the guy who walked in with an Airedale on a leash and climbed onto a stool in front of me. He was thirty minutes late, and to me that was unusual. I've been around people long enough to know they are creatures of habit.

I glanced at the clock. "You're thirty



"Joe, if you wanted to kill someone—do you think you could do it?"

minutes late, Mr. Finley. Your dog must have been walking slow tonight."

Finley nodded, but he didn't say anything. I never saw anyone who kept his mouth shut as much as this fellow did. And not only that, he was the only guy I ever knew who you could stand next to and at the same time feel like he was a million miles away. He was never quite with it in a crowd. I heard someone call him an introvert once—whatever that means.

Tossing some ice into a highball glass, I asked, "The usual?"

Finley nodded again, then motioned with his hand. "No—make it a double, Joe."

I shrugged, poured in a couple of jiggers of bourbon and filled it with soda. Somehow Finley looked different. Maybe it was because he wasn't wearing a tie. He was about forty, had sand colored hair slicked down over his partially bald head, and wore rim-

less glasses which were too large for his hawk-like face. They gave a gelatinous appearance to his liquid blue eyes. I guess the guy only had that one blue serge suit. I never saw him wearing anything else.

"There you are, Mr. Finley," I said, sitting the drink on the bar. And just because I was a little curious I added, "Last time I served you a double was over a year ago. Believe you were in here with your wife, then. I remember her telling you not to order it, but you ordered it anyway."

He peered at me over the edge of the glass and smiled slightly. Funny, but people never seem to get sore at a bartender for probing. Guess they want to talk about their troubles or they wouldn't come in. I'll bet that bartenders have straightened out more people than all the psychiatrists in the country.

However, as I told you, Finley was different. I didn't know how he was going to take it. Then I got a big surprise.

Setting his glass down, Finley fingered it pensively and asked, "Joe, if you wanted to kill someone, do you think you could do it and get away with it?"

I DON'T know why, but suddenly my collar was tight and hot. Understand now, a bartender has to be careful what he says.

So I thought that over real carefully and then chirped, "This is the way I look at it, Mr. Finley. A guy might kill somebody and get away with it as far as the police are concerned, but I believe he'd have it staring him in the kisser for the rest of his life. If he was just an average fella like myself, he might crack up. No, I believe if a man knocked off someone he'd better turn himself in. It'd be easier in the long run."

"I think you're right."

Just for the hell of it I cracked, "You planning on doing away with someone?"

He looked at me kinda funny. "No . . . Can I use your phone?"

"Sure. Booth's in the back."

He pushed the glass toward me and motioned for a refill, then slid off the stool and walked to the phone. He didn't say that he wanted another double, but I started to make one anyway. Finley was in a more talkative mood tonight than I had ever seen

him, and I wanted to keep him that way. People aren't interesting when they're clammed up. You've got to loosen their tongues, one way or another, and get them to spill what's deep down inside of them.

I let the bourbon trickle over the jigger.

He came back and I began polishing a glass that was already clean. "How's Mrs. Finley these days?"

Finley tasted the drink and screwed up his face as pure bourbon hit his tonsils. "More congenial than ever before," he said finally.

"Congenial? Little word—big meaning. Want to tell me about it?"

He was putting the drink down pretty fast and kept watching himself in the mirror. "I guess telling a bartender your troubles is a national institution, isn't it?"

I agreed with him that it was.

"She finds fault with everything I do," he said, rolling the glass between his palms.

"That's an old story."

"Not all of them are like that, Joe. Take my secretary, Carol. There's a sweet girl."

He had kind of a faraway look in his eyes and I knew that the poor devil was tortured. There's probably not over a million guys who have the same kind of problem—wife cross and fading, pretty secretary nice and enticing. It's a helluva situation.

I cleared my throat. "I always said it took two to make an argument. Sometimes we're just as wrong as they are."

Finley looked toward the front for a second, as if he expected to hear something, then turned back to me. "I agree with you on that argument business," he said seriously. "That's why my wife and I never had one. I've found that the only way I can defend myself is to shut up. Silence is the best weapon I know of."

"Keeping your trap shut is one way, I guess. A lot of guys slap them in the face and tell them to knock it off."

That seemed to amuse him a little bit, but it didn't last long. His face turned pensive as he said, "Here's an example of what I mean, Joe. For a month she's been after me to fix some steps leading down to the cellar and have a light switch put at the head of them. The steps were in sorry condition and the only way you could turn on

the lights was after you got down at the bottom. I'll admit it was dangerous, because we kept the dog there and she was always going down to it. If she had ever missed her footing she would have had a long fall onto hard concrete. It might have killed her.

"I told her that I'd fix both the steps and the lights when I got time—that I'd take a day off from the office and do it. But she kept arguing about it, wanting me to do it at night. I don't like to work at night, Joe. I'm tired when I get home from the office."

I saw that his drink was getting low so I started to fix another. This time I forgot the jigger and poured it from the bottle.

"She was out of town today," Finley continued, "so I figured it would be a good time to get the work done. She wouldn't be there to tell me how to do every thing and get in the way. I took the day off and stayed at home. After looking the job over I decided it would be best to tear out the whole stairs and rebuild them. It ran into more work than I had counted on.

"She came home about eight tonight and I started to tell her what I had done, but I didn't get a chance to say a thing because she immediately started that irritating pitter-patter of hers. As I told you before, my only defense against that it to shut up, so that's what I did. I sat down and began to read the paper. She went down to see the dog."

I set the straight bourbon on the bar and took away his old glass. "Then she brought the dog up and told you to take it for a walk?"

The color drained from Finley's face. I heard two sirens blaring it up the street. One of them was the high scream of a patrol car, the other the low moan of an ambulance. They flashed by our place in a swelling wave of alarm. Finley slid from the stool, pitched a ten onto the bar and went to the door with the Airedale.

Again I said, "Then she brought the dog up and told you to take it for a walk?"

Pausing, he said, "I had the dog on the back porch. He was going to have to stay there until I could get the stairs rebuilt."

After Finley left I noticed he hadn't touched the straight bourbon.

I drank it.

How to buy better work clothes



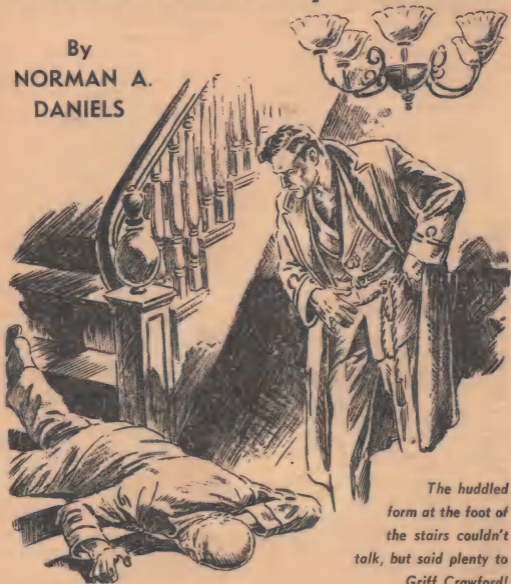
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Where the Body Is Buried

By
NORMAN A.
DANIELS



*The huddled
form at the foot of
the stairs couldn't
talk, but said plenty to
Griff Crawford!*

GRIFF CRAWFORD looked the house over from across the street. It was a big place, with an old fashioned tower which had its four walls glassed in. There were spires and cupolas, a large piece of land with it and the place had obviously

once belonged to someone with wealth. There was even a big barn at the back, now used as a garage.

For a modern family the house was out of the question. It took servants to handle a place of this kind, and people with money

enough to keep it up wouldn't be living this close to the factory section.

The town was in the fifty thousand population class, a drab, dirty place with cheap stores and soot belching factory chimneys. Nobody cared much. People who lived here were too busy hacking out a living to pay more than casual attention to the dirt.

That big house now had a neat sign tacked to the white fence bordering the sidewalk and it advertised rooms for rent. Griff Crawford knew the place. He'd been keeping it under observation for some time. But now he had a job of sorts, in one of the mills, and a good reason for rooming at the big house.

As he crossed the street, carrying the dilapidated suitcase, his free hand gently touched the butt of the army .45 which was stuck down his belt and concealed by his coat. He'd been carrying that gun for three years, just waiting for the moment when he would find a use for it.

He pushed open the gate and as he approached the house, he noticed that it was exceptionally neat. The drab appearance was caused by a need of paint. But the porch and the steps were scrubbed, the lawn tended and shrubs well cultivated, if somewhat amateurishly.

Crawford marched up on the porch and took a long breath as he put down his suitcase and rang the doorbell. He'd waited for this a long, long time. A century or two, it seemed to him now.

When the door opened, he replaced the grim look on his face with a smile. The woman who stood there wasn't as old as he'd expected. Maybe forty, and not looking her age. She was slim, about five feet five and Crawford had to look down at her from his towering six-two. She had very blue eyes which regarded him frankly. Her hair was just beginning to be tinged by gray and she was neat enough to have her picture taken for a fashion magazine.

CRAWFORD didn't like this. He'd wanted her to be dumpy, bedraggled and ugly. He'd wanted her to look something closely approaching the popular conception of a witch, because that was the way he'd figured her all these years. This was the first time

Crawford had ever met Miss Iris Harvey, but he felt he'd known her for years.

This was the woman he had traveled a thousand miles—to kill!

"My name is Kent," he said. "Griff Kent. I'm the man who phoned about the room."

"Oh yes," she smiled. "Come right in. I can tell at a glance that you're the kind of man I want rooming in my home. I told you the price over the phone and I have a very nice room for you."

"That's fine," Crawford said, and wondered why he didn't haul out the gun, blast away and get it over with. That was what he'd promised himself to do. Kill her with as little compunction as she'd killed his brother Phil. But let her know first, of course, why she was going to die. That was only fair.

She said, "If you'll just follow me. Your room is in back, on the second floor and it's nice and quiet."

"How many roomers do you have?" Crawford asked.

"Right now, only two besides yourself, though I can handle six. I suppose I'll have to pretty soon, the way the mills are beginning to hum. During the war I had eight, but that's too many."

Crawford said, "I should think you'd like all you could get."

"Why, no," she told him. "It's too much work and I don't really need the money. You see, I was left some not long ago."

That was it! Crawford knew now there was no mistake. Sure she'd been left money. His brother Phil's money. All fourteen thousand dollars of it—but she hadn't inherited it. She'd stolen it, after Phil was dead. Crawford's face went grim again.

"I guess I couldn't ask for a better place," he commented. "Too many roomers mean too much noise."

"Oh, you won't find this a noisy place, Mr. Kent. Not at all. Ted Martel has the tower room. That ugly glass thing I call a penthouse, stuck up in the middle of the roof. He's been with me for a long time. Then there's Joe Rober. He came just at the close of the war and stayed here ever since. They are both quiet, sober men."

"Good," Crawford said. "Now I'd like to

see my room."

She led him upstairs. He passed an open door, into a small hallway, showing a flight of the steepest stairs he'd seen in a long time. Apparently they led to the tower room. Oddly enough, the stairway was narrower than the walls on either side of it. There were handrails and fancy newel posts.

Then he was in his room. He liked it, even though he planned to use it only as a temporary spot until he had accomplished the mission he set out to fulfill those centuries ago.

He put down his suitcase, took out a wallet and gave her the first two weeks' rent.

She said, "Thank you. I'll have a receipt ready when you come downstairs. I serve breakfast, as I told you, and the other meals you get outside. But I know it's late in the day and you must be tired, so I'll fix you something for supper. On the house, Mr. Kent."

He thanked her gravely, closed the door after she went out and sat down in the old-fashioned, overstuffed rocking chair. He began to rock back and forth automatically. The sensation soothed him, removed that almost overpowering urge to kill her now and get it over with. His mind slipped back into the past.

It brought visions of his brother Phil. A big hulk of a man, as easy going and simple as a child. He hadn't been good looking and he hadn't known how to wear clothes and he had been shy. He'd actually been afraid of women, much to Crawford's great amusement.

That was why he'd been so surprised when Phil had written him that he was going to be married. He'd gone into some detail about it by saying he'd met this woman, whom he named only as Iris, at a blood donors' headquarters where she'd been a volunteer nurse's aide.

WHEN Phil had written that letter, he'd returned to the East where he had grown up and lived all his life. So the postmark on the letter didn't mean anything to Crawford. Phil had nowhere mentioned the

name of the town where Iris lived and where he was going to be married. But he had stated that Dud Bradley was going to be his best man.

There'd been a postscript, too, saying that he was drawing his fourteen thousand dollars out of the bank, but that he'd have it any time Crawford wanted any of it. This Iris, he'd written, was no gold digger and knew how to take care of money.

That had been Phil's last letter. Crawford's, sent from various parts of Europe, were returned with the notation that Phil had moved and left no address.

When Crawford returned, he tried to trace Phil without any luck at all. Then he went looking for Dud Bradley, who was to have been best man. Dud had moved too—and kept on the move. Never amounting to much, Dud floated around and for two years Crawford hunted him.

He found Dud finally, in a west coast flop house, and Dud had little to say. Sure, Phil had talked to him about the wedding and had promised to let him know when and where, but he'd never gotten around to it.

"I was living in Rock Falls at the time," Dud had explained. "Phil showed up one day, without any baggage. So he must have come from some town not too far away. I remember he said that since I was so close by he'd be glad to have me be his best man, since he didn't know another soul in these parts."

That was as much help as Dud could give. Then began another long, tedious search. Crawford had to work and his search had to be done during what spare time he could find. Some of the old blood donor centers kept records, some didn't. Fortunately, the name of Iris was unusual enough so there weren't many nurse's aids with the name.

And then he found her. There wasn't much question about it because Phil had described her fairly well. And Crawford had spent two weeks eating in diners, the kind of places Phil invariably used, until a counter-man recognized the snapshot of Phil which Crawford had carried all these years.

So now the end was in sight. Crawford rocked harder and faster, debating whether or not to do the job at once. Any hopes of

pinning a murder on this woman was almost out of the question. Phil must have been murdered around five years ago and if his corpse had been so successfully concealed that it had not been discovered up to now, there wouldn't be much left for purposes of identification.

He heard Iris coming up the stairs and he reached for the gun. Get it over with—finish the job and then face whatever future there was left for him. Phil was dead, this woman had killed him and she deserved what was coming to her. Crawford opened the door.

Iris said, "I thought you'd like to have supper with me in the kitchen. It's not pleasant eating alone."

He mumbled something, buttoned his coat and followed her to the spick and span kitchen. She had a well cooked and appetizing looking supper on the table. They ate in silence for a little while. Then Crawford looked up suddenly.

"You said it wasn't pleasant eating alone. You're right too, and I suppose you must know how it seems to be lonesome."

"I do indeed, Mr. Kent," she said. She put down her coffee cup, propped her small chin up in a small palm and smiled wanly. "I had my parents to take care of until I was past thirty. There wasn't time for any boy friends. Then the war and—and, well, why should I bore you with what almost happened?"

"I'm interested," Crawford urged her on.

She sighed and went to work on the apple pie. "There was a man but—well—let's not talk about that."

Sure, Crawford thought. Let's not talk about the poor slob who didn't know the difference between a gold digger and a woman nice enough to be his wife. Sure! Who wants to talk about the guy who turned over every dime he had before he was murdered. This was the woman, all right. There was little question about it now.

She said, "Mr. Kent, is something wrong? The way you look!"

HE SHUDDERED and forced a grin. "I guess I was just thinking that I've been lonesome too. You started to talk

about someone. Was it a man you intended to marry?"

She nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, he was—"

The front door slammed shut and someone walked briskly toward the kitchen with mincing little steps. The man who entered was about five feet five, slight of build, bald as an egg and he had a thin, jutting chin and small, pale eyes.

Iris said, "Good evening, Mr. Martel. This is Griff Kent, the new roomer."

Martel shook hands. "Griff?" he frowned. "Griff? That's an odd name."

Crawford shrugged. "The whole name is also odd. It's Griffen."

"Griffen?" Iris cried out. "Griff? Yes, it is an odd name. There can't be very many people with that name. I—I'd better get the dishes started. Mr. Martel, Rober will be here soon. Will you introduce Mr. Kent, please?"

"Come along," Martel said to Crawford. "One thing Miss Harvey has is a comfortable parlor. We'll do a little talking, eh?"

Crawford wanted nothing better. More and more he was certain that Iris must be the woman he sought, but death is irrevocable and before he killed her he wanted no doubts. Martel had lived in the house a long time—he'd know about Phil.

They went to the big living room which Martel called a parlor, and sat down. Crawford lit a cigarette and Martel sucked on a pipe. They talked about generalities at first and then Crawford gradually worked the conversation into the vein he wanted.

"Iris seems like such a nice person—attractive too. It's a wonder she never married."

"She almost did," Martel grunted. "Big, ungainly guy he was. Ugly as sin, but nice enough. Didn't talk much, and he sure fell for Iris. Guess she liked him, too."

"What happened?" Crawford asked.

"Oh, you know how those things are. This guy—well, he talked a good wedding and went away. To get his money, he said. That's the last we ever heard of him."

"He didn't come back at all?" Crawford asked.

Martel gave him a sharp glance. "Why are

you so interested?"

Crawford shrugged. "I'm not. We were making conversation, remember?"

"Well, he didn't come back and that's all I know about it," Martel said curtly. "I'm going to my room. You won't have any trouble meeting Rober. Chances are he'll be half stewed and glad of anybody to chin with."

Martel walked out of the room with those same short steps, but they seemed to be even more hurried. Crawford had little time to think about what Martel had said. The little man couldn't have reached his tower room before the front door banged again, louder this time.

Rober, a beefy, red faced man with tiny bloodshot eyes, started past the parlor door, skidded to a stop and turned to enter. He extended a flabby hand.

"You must be the new roomer," he said and his words were followed by a blast of whisky aroma. "I'm Joe Rober. Glad to know you."

"Hello," Crawford said. "I'm Griffen Kent."

"Griffen? Funny kind of a name. Look, come on to my room and have a snort or two. It's swell with a guy like you living here. Now I don't have to put up with that funeral faced bookie who uses the penthouse."

"Is Martel a bookie?" Crawford asked in surprise.

"Sure. He used to work in one of the mills until four or five years ago. Then he got money enough from some place, to buy out a small-time bookie. What a life. But me, I'd rather earn an honest living."

Rober was garrulous and with a couple of more drinks he'd continue to talk. Crawford was wondering where Martel had gotten the money to buy this bookie business—and just about the time that Phil had vanished and all his money had disappeared too.

Rober had a bottle, poured two stiff drinks into tumblers and drank his like water. "Guy like Martel, always with plenty of dough, and me, hardly able to pay my room-rent. Look, we ain't exactly pals and if you say nothing doing, it's okay. But would you lend me twenty?"

"I suppose I could," Crawford said. What

Rober had already told him was worth the money. Crawford took out some crumpled bills and smoothed them on the arm of his chair. There were two fives and five two-dollar bills.

ROBER took them, grimaced at the smaller bills and then carefully stacked them. When the edges were even, he ripped the corners off all five bills at the same time.

"Not that I'm superstitious," he grinned. "But these deuces pack a lot of bad luck sometimes. Thanks, Griff. I'll give it back to you Friday when I get paid."

Crawford tried to draw him out some more, but it didn't work. Rober seemed to get sleepier the more he drank and pretty soon he was dozing in his chair. Crawford got up, walked out and went to his own room. He shoved the heavy gun under his pillow and partly undressed. Then he lay on the bed and tried to get some sleep.

It was impossible. The goal he'd been trying to attain so many months was now in sight. Strangely enough, he'd never thought much about the moment when it came time to take revenge. He hadn't stopped to consider what this female double-crosser would be like. He wished Miss Harvey had been harder, not so quiet and refined.

Suddenly he swung his legs off the bed, grabbed the gun and hastily put on his shoes and a robe. If he kept thinking like this, he'd go soft. It was time to act. There wasn't the slightest doubt in his mind but that Iris Harvey was the woman he'd searched for so long.

It was after one in the morning when he tiptoed down the stairs. Miss Harvey had a room off the kitchen and as he approached the door, he drew the automatic and pushed the safety to the off position. In a matter of seconds now, Phil would be avenged. No long wait for the courts to act, or having a jury render its verdict more on the basis that the accused didn't look like a killer, than on the facts.

Crawford was even telling himself there wouldn't even be an arrest despite everything he could tell the police. To convict a killer there had to be a corpse.

He listened for a few moments outside

the door, heard nothing and took a firm grasp of the knob. He turned it slowly, opened the door about a foot and he saw her sleeping quietly. There was a window beside her bed and enough moonlight streamed in to help point the picture.

Crawford raised the gun, sighted it and his finger curled around the trigger. She'd murdered his brother! He kept telling himself that over and over again. She was a killer, a woman who thought more of money than a man's life. A woman you'd instinctively trust and who'd slit your throat for whatever was in your pockets. She had to die!

Over the sights of the gun, he saw her stir, as if subconsciously she had become aware of an intruder. She was actually a beautiful woman, he realized. No jury would ever convict her, but it came to him in a flash of horror that they wouldn't take long to convict him. Sure, he had a story. A good one too, which ought to draw some semblance of mercy if he went to trial and could prove he'd dispatched a murderess. But could he? With only these few facts and virtually no concrete evidence?

Crawford lowered the gun slowly. In all those months he'd never thought of it this way. He'd be killing himself as well as killing her. But once he had every proof, it wouldn't work that way. Once he could detail every step of her guilt and dramatically bring out undisputable evidence, the end of his quest would turn out much differently.

"I'm protecting myself," he murmured. "If I kill her now, she will have been the death of two men. There's no sense to it. I've got to get her—take her life in payment for Phil's, but not sacrifice my own in the process."

He backed out of the room and closed the door quickly, before he changed his mind. That had been close, very close. He suddenly felt like running to the front door and not slackening his speed until he was a hundred miles away.

Then came a heavy crash. First there was a hoarse cry from somewhere upstairs. It grew and grew while the crashing noise kept on, until there was an abrupt cessation of both sounds.

Crawford raced up the stairs. The second floor was serene. He headed toward Rober's room, found the door unlocked and snapped on the light. Rober was lying across the bed, still dressed, and within reach of his dangling hands lay an empty whisky bottle.

Certainly Rober hadn't yelled, and there was only Martel left. Crawford hurried back to the door which opened onto the steep stairway. He had no difficulty seeing what had happened. The lights from Martel's room illuminated the stairway—and the crumpled form with the curiously twisted neck which lay at the foot of the steep stairs.

SOON Crawford heard Iris Harvey calling. She'd been awakened too. He moved over beside Martel, picked up his wrist and felt for a pulse. He looked closer at the staring eyes. Crawford had seen death too many times not to recognize it.

Martel had been in pajamas when he tumbled down those stairs. Near the leg cuff of one he saw a small streak of blood. Bright red and fresh. He pulled the pajama leg up a trifle. Just above the ankle, the flesh had puffed out slightly. It was the same on the other ankle.

Crawford stepped over the body and climbed the stairs slowly, looking at the stairway railing posts. He saw nothing like what he thought might be there. Then he found himself in Martel's room. It was a neat place. Magazines and books were carefully placed on the tables and in a bookcase. A desk light was on and below it lay an open book. Crawford wasn't much interested in that.

What really caught his eye was a thin sheaf of currency also placed beneath the desk lamp. There was fifty dollars all told. Two twenties and five two-dollar bills, with the corners torn off. Torn off just as Rober had torn the five bills to remove the mythical and wholly silly bad luck that was supposed to go with a two-dollar bill left intact.

He didn't have time to do any more checking because Miss Harvey emitted a scream from the foot of the stairs. Crawford hurried down. He calmed her and wished he might also calm himself. A dozen ideas were churning through his mind.

Martel hadn't been the victim of an accident. Somebody had stretched a cord across one of the top stairs and he'd tripped and fallen. In fact, Crawford would have sworn that Martel's neck had been snapped after he landed at the foot of the stairs. Martel had been murdered and a killing in this house must have something to do with Phil's death.

Half an hour later a detective sergeant named Jonas took down their statements. Rober had been awakened and sobered reasonably fast by a look at the twisted corpse. He told a plausible story. He'd started drinking when Crawford was in his room, decided to finish the bottle and did.

"Only time I left my room after Crawford went away," Rober said, "was when I went downstairs and paid my room rent. That was around eighty-thirty."

"Yes," Miss Harvey agreed. "That's right."

The mutilated two dollar bills! Crawford thought of them instantly. Rober had paid those bills to Iris Harvey and somehow Martel had come into possession of them. Why? Was Iris Harvey paying him for some reason?

Sergeant Jonas had to raise his voice to make Crawford hear him. "Snap out of it, Crawford," he said sharply. "This is no time to daydream. Come into this next room. I want to talk to you alone."

Crawford shook himself back to reality and trailed behind the detective. When the door was closed, Sergeant Jonas sat down. "Okay," he said, "let's have it."

Crawford stared at him. "What?" he asked dully.

"There are a couple of angles to this I don't like, Crawford. Martel could have been murdered. Now you're a newcomer in town, in this rooming house. You hardly knew anybody here. But if you heard any argument between the dead man and anybody else, this is the time to say so."

Crawford shook his head. "I was in my room, trying to sleep. I always have a hard time sleeping in new beds. Then I heard Martel scream. I ran to Rober's room thinking he was the one who had yelled, but he was lying across the bed, dead drunk. I

knew Miss Harvey was asleep so it had to be Martel. I just looked in that hallway and there he was."

"How do you know Miss Harvey was asleep?" Jonas asked quickly.

Crawford shrugged. "Oh, I didn't, of course. I just guessed. Mainly because she was in a robe and she looked sleepy when she came up on the second floor."

"Just how come you wound up rooming here?" Jonas asked.

"No special reason. I lived at the Hotel Garde for a couple of weeks, but it was too expensive. So I asked around about rooming houses and a guy who runs a diner told me about this place. I telephoned Miss Harvey and that was all there was to it."

"And you never knew Martel before tonight?"

"Not me," Crawford replied. "I don't know any bookies."

JONAS gave him a sharp glance. "Bookie? Did you think Martel was a bookie? Come again, Crawford. Martel was one of those mysterious guys who never work but always have money. Not too much, but enough so he could loaf for a living. He never made book in his life."

"Rober thought that's how he made his dough," Crawford said with a shrug. "I never laid any bets with him."

"Okay," Jonas said. "I'd stick around if I was you. It would look better if we needed you in a hurry. That's all. You can go back to bed."

As Crawford left the room, Rober was on his way to see the detective. Iris Harvey sat in a corner chair, her eyes still red from crying. Crawford pulled over a chair and sat down beside her.

"The way the cops are handling this," he said, "they have an idea it's murder."

Her eyes grew very round and her lips opened to make a perfect "O." She didn't say anything. She seemed too startled to comment.

Crawford said, "Rober claims he paid you his rent, went to his room and didn't come out again. Is that right?"

"I—think so," she managed. "He did pay me."

"What kind of money did he use?" Crawford asked bluntly.

"Why, it was fifteen dollars. A ten and a five."

"Did you see Martel after that?"

"No. I read for a while and then went to sleep. Why are you questioning me?"

"Would you rather the police did?" Crawford got up. "Our stories have to jibe and I was just checking up. I'm going to my room, if you don't mind."

Of course she was lying. Crawford told himself this a hundred times during the next hour. Rober had paid the rent with those two-dollar bills. Martel was a man who lived without working and was never broke. His money came from her. It was blackmail money. Crawford knew she had killed Phil. That was it! And like all blackmailers, Martel had pushed his luck too far.

Iris Harvey could have arranged that cord across the stairway easily enough. Somehow she'd known that Martel would be coming down the stairs and a fall would likely be the death of him.

Then Crawford gave a low whistle. If that was true, what happened to the cord? He'd reached the stairway before Iris Harvey and he'd actually looked for signs of the booby trap. There had been none. Who removed it then? Somebody had to, unless his whole theory was crazy.

Crawford opened the door and stepped into the hall. The house had grown silent. It must be close to dawn, he realized. Walking softly, he climbed the stairway. Martel's room was brightly lighted.

He reached the door and saw Iris Harvey dump the contents of a dresser drawer on the bed and start examining each item. Crawford frowned thoughtfully. Of course! He'd been a fool not to think of it. If Martel had been blackmailing her, he must have hidden a statement about what he knew somewhere in the room.

She didn't know he was there. Her back was partly turned toward him and he saw her pick up a small white piece of paper. Suddenly her hand went to her throat and she stifled a small scream. She turned suddenly and when she saw him, her face, already pale, went perfectly white.

Crawford walked up to her and took the object from her unresisting hand. Then it was his turn to gasp in astonishment. What she had found was a snapshot. It showed Phil—and beside him, Crawford. A little younger, but there was no mistaking him. A snapshot Phil had always carried.

Martel had known all along that he was Phil's brother. He hadn't talked because he was paid to keep his secret. But Iris Harvey's surprise was genuine.

"You're Phil's brother. Griffen Crawford. But you said your name was Kent?"

"Yes," he said. "I'm Phil's brother."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asked.

"If Phil decided against marrying me, that was his right. Why did you come here?"

"To kill you," Crawford said simply. "As you killed Phil."

"I . . . killed him? But how—why—where did you ever get such an idea?"

"Phil wrote me about you. He wrote that he had drawn all his money out and was going to marry you. He came here, to this town. I can prove it. Then he vanished and so did his money. Fourteen thousand dollars. Murder has been done for a lot less. And you came into money about the time Phil vanished."

SHE sat down on the edge of the bed. "My money came when my father died. Murder! You think I killed your brother?"

"I know it," Crawford said quietly. He was looking beyond her, at the further wall, noticing a motionless shadow.

Somebody was in the doorway, just beneath the hall light. His hand went to his belt, where he'd carried a gun so long, and remembered that the weapon was under the pillow in his room again.

He said, "Martel knew the whole story. He knew Phil had been murdered for his money and he had the proof. He knew, in short, where the body is buried."

"But—but he couldn't have told you I killed Phil," Iris Harvey cried.

"He told me everything he knew," Crawford lied. She suddenly turned to face him and her mouth opened to speak, but stayed agape. She stepped back a little.

"Rober!" she cried. "Rober!"

"Just stand where you are, both of you." Rober's voice came from behind Crawford. "I thought Martel had sung his song. He was money hungry. He bled me for years and that wasn't enough. He recognized you the minute he saw you, just as I did, and he went to you for money. A big lump sum—in return for the name of the man who polished off Phil."

Crawford wasn't looking at the gun or at Rober. His eyes could only see Iris Harvey and they saw her dead—from a bullet he'd fired. He shuddered visibly.

"Martel told you where I hid Phil's body, didn't he?" Rober demanded. "He wanted six thousand from me. All that was left. The double-crossing rat. He'd have taken that, got what he could out of you and then run for it. Leaving me to hold the bag. To be burned for killing Phil."

Crawford gulped, moistened his lips and tried to talk. At first only a dismal croak came out. Then he managed to make himself understood. "You—killed Phil! You killed him for his money."

"Sure I did," Rober said. "I knew he was seeing Iris and that he went back East to get his money. So when he returned here, I met him. We were friends. After all, I was a roomer here too and Phil was coming here to live. The big sap! I had no trouble at all. He never knew what hit him."

Iris Harvey was saying nothing, but she had slowly backed away, until she was stopped by a dresser against the wall. Rober wasn't paying much attention to her. In his eyes, Crawford was the dangerous member of this pair. He leveled his revolver.

"So now I've got to knock you off. Both of you—and plant you where nobody ever will think to look for you. It's easy, when you use your head. There's a cemetery a block away from here. A big one. People are buried there every day. So all I have to do is scoop out the soft fill, tuck you down to share somebody else's grave and that's it. Whoever digs up a new grave?"

Crawford was rocking slowly, getting set to make a lunge for him. He'd likely take a bullet but at least he'd die trying. Maybe Iris could get away. He owed her that.

Suddenly she emitted a scream. "You

killed Phil. You murdered him! He meant to come back to me and you stopped him!"

Rober kept talking, as if he wanted to brag. "I wasn't as drunk as I looked tonight. I put a wire across the stairs, and then I told Martel I was going to kill him. He ran out of the room, down the stairs and tripped. Before you got there, Crawford, I was back in my own room."

Suddenly Iris whirled and scooped up anything she could find on the dresser. The gun didn't even exist so far as she was concerned. A rain of missiles began to fly.

Crawford leaped. Rober spun to face him and his gun went off, but the bullet missed. Crawford needed twenty seconds to finish him. He did it methodically. The moment Rober's gun had been knocked to the floor, he chopped him to pieces.

Then he went to Iris Harvey's side and put an arm about her waist. "I didn't deserve what you did, saving my life, but it got us the truth at last. Rober killed Phil. Martel knew it and blackmailed him. Rober recognized me, guessed I'd come for revenge and murdered Martel before he could reach me. Rober wasn't even sure he hadn't. But he tried to frame you for it by paying Martel in money which I could identify—and swearing you must have given it to him."

"I see that now," Iris said, shivering. "And all the while I thought Phil had simply lost interest. I was such a fool to make a mistake like that."

"Don't talk about it," Crawford said. "Call the police. It won't be hard to find Phil's body in that graveyard. Rober is finished. But Iris—don't blame yourself for not seeing the truth."

"But I do, I do!" she cried.

"You only erred in believing that Phil stayed away from choice. I made a mistake too, a much worse one. I won't talk about it. I'll try never to think about it again. But I learned that revenge is dangerous. It's like a loaded gun in the hands of a fool. When it goes off, the damage is done."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Good. I'm glad, and you'll never know, Iris. We've got our lives to re-organize. Let's concentrate on that—and on seeing that Rober is put where he belongs."

INNOCENT PARTY

CHAPTER I

RESCUE FROM FIRE

THE red sedan slewed wildly around the icy corner of Broadway, bounced over hose lines lumpy with frozen spray, skidded to a stop behind Nine Truck just as the roof of the Plastoy factory opened up like the lid of a trunk. An upward gush

of lurid orange flame made the searchlight beam funneling up from the street pale and feeble. Marshal Pedley grabbed his smoke mask before he slid out from behind the wheel.

The deck-pipe of a piston pumper lanced a solid stream through the fourth floor windows. A red-faced man, whose white cap bore the crossed trumpets of a battalion

*When a girl perishes in the
fire-blasted Plastoy factory,*

*Marshal Pedley's only clue
to the firebug is a thin*

sliver of glass!



Blankow held an automatic in his right fist



A Novelet by

STEWART STERLING

chief, gave hoarse orders to a handie-talkie mike.

Pedley watched hosemen high on the eighty-foot ladder retreat in the face of vicious spurts of flame from window apertures below them. "Anybody in there, Mac?"

"Hell, yes!" Chief MacKinnon put the *Listen* disc to his ear. "Bill Schacter, Thirty-one Hose, an' two of the Rescue Team. Superintendent of the factory says he was the only one working in the building, but Bill claims he heard a dame up on the second floor, screaming for help. They're tryin' to find her. With those roof girders gone, that front wall won't last five minutes."

Pedley took a halligan bar from the rack on the hook and ladder. "Where'd that back-flash come from? Top floor?"

"Third. Storerom. They had fifty, sixty thousand of those damn celluloid and pyroxylin dolls racked up there. Burn like incendiary bombs. Glass eyes exploding, raw stock blazing like a battery of blow torches. Crysake! You can't go up there! I'm tryin' to hustle those boys out now—before that street wall caves in!"

"Won't take me five minutes, Mac." The marshal slogged through puddles that gleamed like spilled claret under the apparatus headlights, and went up a short ladder sheathed with ice. Bilious yellow fumes vomited from the window to which the ladder led. He fixed his mask, went in, felt his way by pounding on the floor with the head of the halligan.

The planking wasn't spongy but it was tilting toward the rear of the building. That blast which had blown off the roof must have loosened all the floor beams. Mac had overestimated: if the street wall didn't come down like the thousand tons of brick it was within three minutes, the marshal was a bad guesser.

PROBABLY he shouldn't have risked coming in; there hadn't been any suggestion of arson from the Chief. Still, he had to be sure. This was the season when firebugs sometimes did their stuff in the toy district, right after the Christmas rush. If Plastoy had really been stocking fifty thousand dolls, maybe somebody had decided to

sell them to the insurance company.

With a quick-burner like this old loft building, only way was to be on the spot where the fire started before the flames burnt up what evidence there might be. Then, too, what was a girl doing in a factory at eleven p.m. when the superintendent didn't know she was there?

Fumes fogged the eyepiece of his mask so he could hardly make out the door entrances. One here at his right. Locked or bolted. The halligan would force it, but it would take time. Stairs, there, up to the third, at his left. Another door, outlined with luminous pink-orange. He knelt, felt on the floor, and followed the hose in.

Heat banking down from the ceiling was like weight on his shoulders. It made his fingernails ache and he could tell from the tickly sensation at the back of his neck that the short hairs were singeing.

Out of the pandemonium—the crackle of blazing wood, the hissing of cold water on hot metal, the constant, sprinkling tinkle of breaking glass, the thud of falling plaster, the roar of the two-inch streams, the rumble of motors in the street—he heard hammering. It was toward the street, in that room behind the locked door, he hadn't taken time to force.

A soggy chunk of plaster smashed across his shoulders, knocked him to his knees. Steaming water pelted down through the gap in the ceiling, drenching his legs as if he'd stepped into an unbearably hot shower. He bumped into a file cabinet, then a stenographer's swivel chair. Evidently the hammering was at the far end of the Plastoy office.

The floor sagged still more. He crawled past a huge safe, a water cooler, saw the blur of a portable torch, touched rubber boots.

Two firemen were smashing at a metal door. In the vague haze of light the word loomed whitely through the smoke: **WOMEN**. One man swung a mallet at the force bar the other held on the lock. Sagging floor beams above had wedged the top of the frame down over the door.

Pedley stood up, went back to the steel file, muscled it, slid it as close to the door as he could get. The cabinet wasn't locked. He pulled the lower drawer way out, the next

part way out, used them as a ladder, climbed on top of the file, poked the curved point of his force tool under the door frame.

Wood cracked under his leverage, but the file teetered. There was a dull, muttered rumbling like freight cars crossing a bridge. The light on the floor slid away. The firemen scrambled back, were swallowed in smoke.

The floor angled sharply down from the street. Bits of plaster stung the marshal's hands and throat. The ceiling fell.

Pedley kept hold of the force tool, drove its point into the floor as he toppled. The door banged open above his head as he clung to the halligan's handle, lying at a forty-five degree angle. He pulled himself up, grabbed the door sill.

The air cleared, fumes and flames rising like the spotting of a volcano through the collapsed ceiling space. But he could see. On the white tile of the floor, pinned beneath a twelve-inch I-beam, was a girl. Sparks settling on her suit were making widening circles of glowing gilt.

He worked up the slant to the beam. She was alive but not much more. The falling beam had crushed her left shoulder and side. He ripped off her smouldering jacket and beat out the sparks on her skirt.

IT TOOK a long minute to hack away the tile beneath her eyes, to drag her out from beneath the beam. How long it took to haul her down that roof-sloping floor, a foot at a time, he couldn't have told. But by then both of them were half drowned in the deluge of icy water cascading from above. They must have hooked in the water tower, he realized, numb with cold, gasping for breath because the downpour had knocked off his mask.

The wall gave way as he got to the stairs—brick and beams avalanching behind them as he jumped, fell, sprawled in a heap just inside the street door.

Ladder-men pulled him out of the rubble, lifted the girl.

Pedley coughed up a thin trickle of smoke. "Ambulance, quick."

The Department surgeon was at his side. "Easy, Ben. Lie down. We'll carry you."

"Leggo." The marshal rubbed icicles off his eyebrows. "I'll be oke, soon's I get a dry pair of pants. What about her?" He crouched by the limp figure, studying the delicately-boned features, the fine, spun-taffy hair.

The surgeon made swift examination, used his stethoscope, did things with a hypodermic.

"Smashed up inside, Ben. Wonder she lasted long's she has. One in a hundred chance."

The girl's eyelids flickered, wearily. She stared up at the cluster of men, dazed.

Pedley put his face close; spoke slowly: "All right, now. All over. Doc'll take care of you."

Her lips tried to form a word, but no sound came.

"How'd you happen to be up there?" He helped to slide her on the stretcher.

She shook her head; her face twisted with remembered terror.

He didn't want to try for an *in extremis* statement from a girl in that condition; he'd always hated to ask dying people if they realized they only had a few minutes to live. But he might have to come to that, now.

"How'd the fire start? Understand what I'm saying? How did the fire get started?"

She closed her eyes, moaning, "Joe! Joe!"

Pedley got as far as: "What did Joe do?" before he was pushed aside violently by a tall, thin man with dark, fierce eyes:

"Stell," he cried. "I'm here, Stell!"

Half a dozen rubber-coated arms grabbed for the man, but the marshal held up both hands:

"Leave 'm alone."

CHAPTER II

GIRL VICTIM



HE WAS a tall man wearing a vest but no coat. His shirt sleeves were rolled up to the elbows. On his skinny forearms were soot smudges, a greasy-looking spot where a spark had burned him, some scratches with blood freshly dried on them.

"God sake, Stell!" He flopped on both

knees beside her. "What was it? Why didn't you go home?"

If she heard, she gave no sign; her eyes were closed; eyelids and lips both had that leaden blue which comes from more than biting cold.

Pedley touched the surgeon's arm. "I'll take him along in the amby." He bent, cupped a palm under the man's chin, forced his head up. "Have to get her to the hospital, fella. Come on."

Enginemen slid her in the red ambulance. They brought a ladderman, his face black and bloody, another, pale and greasy with sweat, put them on the cots behind her. Two assistants worked calmly at the oxygen dials.

Pedley pushed the tall man in ahead of him. The gong made staccato clangor. The ambulance got up to speed.

The tall man groaned: "She going to die?"

The assistant holding the oxygen breather at the girl's mouth felt of her wrist. "She'll get to the operating room." He moved one shoulder slightly.

Pedley bent to examine a glint of light in the blonde hair, removed a splinter of glass, examined it, slipped it into a cellophane envelope, stuck it in his breast pocket. "You the super, fella?"

"I'm Joe Brenkow, yes." The man put his elbows on his knees, bent forward as if he were about to be sick at his stomach, covered his face with his hands. "It's my fault Stell's this way."

"Yair? Why?"

"I told the firemen there wasn't anyone but me in the damn building. Didn't think there was. I've been there since supper, in the stamping room, fixing a mould. I was all alone until Stell came in around half-past ten."

"Who's she?"

Brenkow took his hands down. "Stella Vrenn. Best doll designer in the business. She makes up our new models for Gretz after the old man approves the sketches. But she didn't have any work to do tonight—we haven't started to set up next year's models yet. She just came to the office to get some of her things. We talked a while, she told me she was going right back to the apartment, so I thought she had."

The siren shrieked like an animal in pain. Stella's left hand twitched convulsively, her fingers relaxed on the edge of the cot. Something glittered to the rubber mat on the floor.

Pedley picked it up. A small gold buckle with an inch of russet strap attached, "This from her handbag?"

Brenkow took frightened eyes off the girl's face long enough to glance at it.

"Looks like the color of one she had."

"She carrying it tonight?"

"Think so."

Pedley put it in his pocket. The ambulance zoomed into the Emergency entrance.

STARCHY internes lifted the stretcher, whisked her to an operating dolly, into an elevator. The marshal led Brenkow to the waiting room in the Emergency wing. "You and Miss Vrenn—pretty close, hah?"

The man's face was deeply etched with strain. "If she lives, she'll be Mrs. Brenkow soon's she gets out of the hospital."

"How long you been engaged?"

"Been going around together, shows and parties, stuff like that, pretty near a year. But we only set the deal, really, tonight."

"Oh? You asked her to come to the factory?"

"No." Brenkow hesitated, wretchedly. "I didn't know she was coming. She'd made up her mind to quit, that was all. Came down to get things out of her desk."

"At ten-thirty on a Monday night? Why was she quitting?"

"Some trouble with Gretz. I don't know."

A guarded look came into the superintendent's eyes. "She didn't go into it, except she was pretty upset."

"Yair?" A disgruntled employee; a night fire! Pedley couldn't ignore the implications. "You stay here. Be a while before you get any news. Just sit tight. I'll be back."

The marshal found a uniformed policeman in the Detention Ward, left him outside the waiting room.

There was a phone booth outside the Dispensary. After the marshal used his nickel, a brisk voice answered:

"Bureau of Fire Investigation. Malloy talking."

"Time you did some work for a change,"

Pedley said. "Fan your pants up to Saint Vincent's Hospital."

"You hurt?" Barney Malloy was alarmed.

"Don't file a disability claim for me yet.

What I want you and your notebook for—take down anything mentioned by a Stella Vrenn, doll designer, twenty-six, blonde, single."

"Ah, ha! What room?"

"Operating room. She's on the table now, Barney. What she says under anaesthetic may be all we get."

"Wah! My inner tubes do nipups when I smell ether and watch that kinda stuff, coach."

"Don't watch. Listen. And Barney—dig around in the Insurance Claimants file, see if you can come up with anything on a toy man named Gretz. And bring the inspection folder on the Plastoy Building."

"On Queer Street?"

"Bears all the marks."

HE CAUGHT a cab, was back on the rubble-strewn, hose-littered street in five minutes. Even at that hour there were several hundred onlookers huddled behind the fire lines, old men in bathrobes and overshoes, kids in overcoats and pajamas. People who lived near enough to have been burned out if MacKinnon's men hadn't kept the blaze under control.

News photographers were flashbulbing the shell of the gutted structure. There were no flames, but a column of smoke and steam slanted up into the night sky. Sparks winked brightly against the cold stars.

He found the captain of the first due company; learned the alarm had been turned in by Brenkow.

"Guy stood by the box in his shirtsleeves, waving us on. Not that we needed it. Stuff was shooting out the windows like tracer shells."

"That pyroxylin, yair. No use to take color pix of the smoke here; comes out looking like a rainbow, anyhow."

The captain looked ugly. "If this was one of those things, lemme get my mitts on the bug before you take him down-town, Marshall. Both boys who got hurt. They're in my company."

Marshall Pedley nodded, his face somber.

"Know how you feel. What happened to the sprinkler system? Did the feeder freeze up?"

"The control valve was shut off. Might've been that way for a couple weeks; the Prevention Bureau only inspects twice a month." The captain pointed to a smouldering heap of timbers and brick. "The wrench for the shut-off nut is supposed to be chained to the valve, but it wasn't there. It's under that pile. Show you, when we get it cleaned away."

"'Sokay. Meantime ask a couple your men to slant a shortie up against that second floor, hah?"

"That second floor hasn't any support." The Captain was dubious. "Beams're just teetering on the lip of those retainer walls. Any of that weight above shifts while the boys are damping down—boom!"

"My weight won't make that much difference, Cap. Ask Emergency to switch on that search again, will you?" He took a scaling ladder off Nine Truck, went up the short ladder the truckmen placed for him, stepped cautiously off onto the slanting floor as if walking a tight-wire.

CHAPTER III

TRAIL OF A FIREBUG



DESKS, files, tables, chairs, the cooler all had slid down against the blackened bones of the charred partition between office and showroom. Only the anchored safe remained, in its original position, tilted over in a sheathing of spray ice.

He laid the scaling ladder flat on the slanting floor, its tip caught around a leg of the safe, and let himself down gingerly by the cross-bars.

Most of the chairs and all the desks were partly burned. The desk that had been most nearly eaten out by flames was an oak flat-top which evidently had been smack up against the inner partition; the linoleum around the legs had been deeply charred

but beneath the four oaken feet, the floor covering had merely been discolored by heat.

One half of the plate-glass top of the desk had been shattered from beneath; shards stuck up like unruly hair on a boy's head. The solid wood top had been ripped loose from the right hand drawers as if pried up with some gigantic claw tool. This was where the fire had started.

In the charcoaled drawers at the left side he found catalogues—water-soaked, curled at the edges, yellowed with heat. Toy catalogues. Dolls, puppets, figurines, with export prices in guilders, pesos, marks. A white subscription sticker on one read STELLA VRENN—12-51—PLASTOY—NEW YORK CITY 17—NEW YORK—USA.

Beneath the knee-hole was a clutter of stuff covered with burnt fragments of wood and twisted bits of wire, lumps of soggy plaster. A typewriter upside down. A file tray. Melted rubber stamps. A stapler. Paper clips bronzed by the heat.

He dug through the trash methodically, the glare of the searchlight reflected from the adjoining building giving him all the light he needed.

Under the burnt-through right hand drawers he found part of what he was looking for—twin warped aluminum rectangles hinged together at the bottom. The frame of a girl's handbag. The gold catch had fused into a blob of shiny metal. All that was left of the russet leather was a gray and crumbly ash.

Nestling inside the frame were an enameled compact, a brass lipstick tube with the contents melted out, a cracked mirror, hairpins, a misshapen fountain pen, a blackened thin box which had contained aspirin, a cigarette lighter and coins.

He put them all in his metal evidence box and kept searching. There should be something else, here.

The recall sounded for the companies which had responded to the third alarm. Gongs clanged, motors roared in the street below.

The heat of the masonry and smouldering woodwork began to dissipate. The marshal's hands were numbing with cold. Still

he hunted through the rubbish, sifting every lump of plaster, combing all the crumbly char. The thing he was looking for couldn't have been knocked away by water or blown apart from the other things in the handbag by an explosion of the dolls which must have been in those drawers.

All he found was a sooty cylinder about an inch and a half long and an inch wide. He took special care with that, sliding it into an empty tobacco tin and packing it in with cotton batting.

But the thing he expected to find wasn't there. It might be the key to the torching.

He glanced up at the iced ruins. The party who'd bonfired a building full of explosives, endangering the lives of sleeping hundreds nearby, wouldn't have any more conscience than a cobra. Let him get away with this and, sooner or later, he'd strike again.

LATER, when Pedley called at the hospital, a nurse brought Barney out of the operating room. The deputy's ordinarily ruddy features were drained of color.

"She hasn't said more'n a couple words, marshal. Near as we could make out, she muttered 'Louise' both times. You ask me, she isn't goin' to say anything more. Ever."

"Bad, hah?"

"Fractured spine, punctured lung—I wrote down all those medico terms." Barney tapped his notebook. "Question of time, that's all."

"Yair." Pedley handed him the tobacco box. "Piece of burnt cork in here, Barno. Ask the lab boys to stick it under the spectroscope, see if they find traces of flammable material."

"Gasoline?"

"Brandy, at a guess. And get hold of Shaner. I want photos of what's left of the Plastoy office."

He went to the waiting room. A short, white-haired, plump-cheeked Santa Claus of a man sat across the room from Joe Brenkow. The older man had an overcoat with a glossy, astrakhan collar folded across his lap. He gnawed on an unlighted panatela, stonily ignoring the superintendent.

Brenkow jumped up, the question stark in

his eyes.

Pedley said: "Still on the table. They've given her a transfusion."

"She's got a chance, marshal?" It was an anguished plea for some crumb of encouragement.

"They'll let you know. Does she have any folks who ought to be told?"

"No. Folks are dead. She lived with a friend, Louise Aymar, our office manager. Down in the Village. Three hundred twelve Jane. Guess I should've phoned Louise—maybe Mr. Gretz did, though." He turned to the Santa Claus individual.

"Phone? I phoned nobody." The manufacturer stood up very straight, a little pompous. "Straight to the factory I went when I heard about the fire on the midnight newscast. They told me a girl had been nearly burned to death in my office, so down here I came in a taxi. Now I am here, there is a policeman who says I can't go out again. It's not enough I lose everything in my business, now I'm under arrest!"

"No." The marshal studied him bleakly. Gretz was angrily resentful, but not at the girl's suffering or Brenkow's distress. "Precautionary detention, that's all. Routine in incendiary cases."

"*The fire was no accident?*" Gretz whispered hoarsely.

"It was set. Any idea why it was?" Pedley didn't address either man directly.

Brenkow said nothing, looked away from Gretz. The manufacturer held his cigar between thumb and forefinger, pointing it at the marshal:

"If I could speak with you, confidential?"

"You could come along with me to Miss Vremm's apartment." Pedley put a hand on Brenkow's shoulder. "They're doing everything they can for her, fella."

He led Gretz to the red sedan with the brass bell on the front bumper. When they were rolling, he asked:

"What's your idea, now?"

"That fire was set to ruin me, that's what."

"Weren't you covered?"

"Insurance? On my stock, yes. On my building, which the bank owns most of it anyhow, yes. But on the season, I'm not in-

sured." He spoke with dull bitterness.

"You didn't carry profit-insurance to cover what you might lose if your factory was burnt out?"

THE manufacturer's face betrayed twisted misery: "How could I? In the toy business, you got to be ready with new lines, new items, right at the start of the season, or you don't get any business. The first showings are next month; by then I wouldn't even have machines set up again. So I'm licked for the whole year and Joe Brenkow figured on that."

"He wouldn't have a job if he put you out of business, would he?"

"He'd start in on his own with a lot of my moulds he could have stolen, and he wouldn't have me for a competitor. This, it is not just a suspicion, y'understand. Only this weekend, I hear that's how they're planning to double-cross me. This morning already, I'd have fired the both of them, but I wanted to be positive I wasn't doing nobody an injustice so I meant to take this week to make sure my information was right." Gretz clutched the marshal's arm excitedly. "Somehow they have found out I got wise, decided it wasn't safe to wait—"

"They? Brenkow and . . .?"

"Stella! Who else? Between them they got all the dope on my customers, my prices, my models. What a stupe I been, trusting the two of them with every secret it took me a lifetime to learn. Now they got me over a barrel."

Pedley thought of the girl on the operating table. "Brenkow wouldn't have wanted to kill his girl, would he?"

"That fella?" Gretz shook his head as if utterly baffled. "You can't tell what goes on in his mind. Six years he's been with me, now he does a terrible thing like this. I'm not saying it's absolutely so, y'understand, but I wouldn't put it past him to make sure there's nobody who could testify against him, if it comes to court."

The red sedan turned into Jane Street. Number 312 was half a block away. Pedley pulled in to the curb. "Where were you tonight, say around ten, ten-thirty?"

"At my church. All evening, since supper,

I been at a church meeting. Around ten I come home with Carl Harch—he's a deacon, too. We were eating a snack of bratwurst when I hear about this on the radio."

As good an alibi as anyone would want, Pedley admitted to himself. "Who tipped you off about Brenkow and Miss Vrenn planning to set up in business?"

"Luddy. My boy. Our sales manager. From Louise, he learned about it. Some day, I hope, Louise she'll be my daughter-in-law. A fine, smart girl."

CHAPTER IV

MISSING BRANDY BOTTLE



IT WAS a remodeled house and had only two occupants. The card beneath one of the three mail-boxes said *Aymar-Vrenn—Apt. 3*. Pedley didn't push the buzzer button.

There was no elevator. The stairs were steep and narrow. The *wham-wham-whammity-wham* of a dance band throbbed somewhere above in the musty darkness. When they reached the third floor, the music was coming from apartment three and with it the sound of dancing.

Pedley knocked.

The door opened at once. The brunette who peered out was flushed, her hair was disheveled with dancing. She wore black satin pajamas with gold braid on the jacket. It wasn't a costume meant to hide her curves.

"Hullo!" She stared at Pedley, puzzled, then saw the manufacturer behind him in the hall: "Mister Gretz! Petesake!"

A young man appeared at her side, a taller, sandy-haired, sandy-mustached edition of the toy maker. He wore neither coat or vest. His mauve sportshirt seemed more suitable to Miami than midwinter New York.

"Poppa," he exclaimed. "What the hell!" Gretz cried: "Something terrible, Luddy! The factory, it's burnt down, completely!"

The girl opened her mouth wide and her eyes became round with horror. Ludwig pushed her aside, grabbed his father's shoulder.

"You trying to frighten us?!"

"Truth, Luddy. And," Gretz turned to Louise, "that ain't all. Stella, she was in there, in the building somewhere. She got burned awful. She's at the hospital."

Louise put fists to her mouth, made a piteous mewling sound.

Pedley's eyes roved around the huge studio living-room, more like a toy shop than a girl's apartment. The bookcases full of dolls—dolls in Dutch costume, dolls dressed like bullfighters, Javanese dancer dolls, cowboy dolls, pickanniny dolls, and on the piano, the television set, the cocktail table. There were rag dolls, wooden dolls, flaxen-haired bisque babies in fluffy dresses, naked pink dolls with bald heads and dismembered limbs. Three highball glasses stood on the cocktail table, and a silver ice-bucket rested on the bookcase.

Gretz was explaining: "The very worst you haven't heard yet. This gentleman here, he's the Fire Marshal. He's claiming the factory was set afire on purpose."

Louise dropped weakly into a low-slung chair, wailing: "I told you, Luddy. I told you she was going to do something desperate."

"She wouldn't have done that." Ludwig looked stunned, like a man who's just stepped out of a wrecked automobile. "I know she was good and sore, but I don't believe she'd have done that."

Pedley sniffed at one of the highball glasses. The smell of brandy was strong. But there was no cognac bottle around anywhere.

"Having a little party?" he asked. "Was Miss Vrenn in on that?"

Louise moaned, slumped over her chair in a dead faint.

Ludwig ran for water while the elder Gretz bent over Louise, crying:

"Put her on the floor, yes? Bring blood to her head?"

Pedley watched the girl's eyelids flutter slightly. "Where's the brandy? That'll fix her."

Ludwig hurried in. "Bottle in the kitchen somewhere." He knelt by the chair, holding a tumbler to Louise's lips.

IN THE kitchenette the marshal found a small gas stove, a big electric refrigerator, a sink with empty club-soda bottles, trays that had held ice cubes. On a white enameled table was a half-full fifth of Cuban rum. But no brandy.

He opened cupboards, a closet, the refrigerator. Not even an empty cognac bottle could he find.

He took the rum back to the living-room. Gretz and his son were lugging the girl to the bedroom. Her lips were shut tightly. Pedley'd seen too many smoke victims to fall for a phony faint like that.

"Try rum." He held out the bottle. "Couldn't find any cognac."

Ludwig chafed the girl's hands. "That was a bad shock to her. She thinks the world of Stell. Minute she comes to, she'll want to rush to the hospital."

Pedley lifted the dust-skirts of the double beds, peered beneath. "They wouldn't let her see Miss Vrenn. What happened to that brandy, do you suppose?"

The manufacturer exclaimed. "It's important? A bottle of liquor? At a frightful time like this?"

Pedley nodded. "Chances are the blaze was set by pouring brandy into some of those plastic dolls' heads, touching a match to it. Easy to prove; he traces of pelargonate in the wood of the desk drawer where the fire started. Stuff isn't in rum or whiskey or alcohol." He opened a closet. Hangers with skirts, coats, sweaters, nightgowns. A man's overcoat on a hook. Shoe racks and hat holders. An agreeable scent of mignonette—but no tall, narrow-necked bottle.

Gretz swore feelingly. "Such a fiend! Who would do that!"

Ludwig held the rum bottle to Louise's mouth. "Maybe Stell took the brandy with her. She knew Joe was working late; maybe she took it so they could have a little nip together. They've been chumming around a long time. She asked him to come here after dinner but he had to fix one of the machines."

Pedley opened bureau drawers. "You said Miss Vrenn was sore. What made her mad?"

"I did," Ludwig admitted unhappily. "We had dinner at Lavretto's, the three of us. All

had a few drinks—and when we got here we had a couple more. Not tight, but just feeling good. Louise put some records on, and I did a couple rumba numbers with her, then with Stell. Everything was rosy and cozy until she made some crack about our having a drink to celebrate what she and Joe were planning to do."

Louise opened her eyes, looked up in sudden alarm. When she saw the marshal watching her, she struggled to sit up.

Ludwig held her shoulders. "Rest a minute, hon." He turned to Pedley. "Guess I'd had one or two over my limit or of course I'd have known Stell simply meant she and Joe were going to announce their engagement. Everybody'd been expecting it for some time."

Louise protested. "Please, Luddy! Don't talk about it."

Pedley went to the side of the bed. "He'll talk. You'll all talk. You think you can keep still about it when one girl is damn near dead and two good firemen are flat on their backs in the hospital? When a few hundred thousand dollars' worth of property has gone up in smoke and a hundred people were turned out of their beds in the middle of the night? You *better* talk; and get it straight, too!"

Ludwig fingered his mustache uneasily. "He's right, Lou. I can't duck my responsibility." He eyed the marshal gloomily. "Poppa and I'd been knocked for such a loop by what we'd learned about Joe and Stell—their quitting and starting up a competitive firm—that I couldn't think of anything else when Stell mentioned their plans. So like a fathead I told her I wouldn't drink to any lousy setup like that. She got angry, naturally, and wanted to know what I meant. One thing led to another, and I'd let her know what we'd found out about her and Joe."

The girl on the bed struggled away from him. "I don't see why you try to take the blame! Stell was the one who called *you* a scummy skunk! She was furious with me, as well as with you. Banged out of here like a raging maniac!"

Pedley asked: "Did she have the brandy bottle with her?"

Ludwig seemed startled. "I don't think so. I don't know. If she took it, I didn't see her."

The marshal grunted. "I'm gonna take one more peek around the kitch."

NONE of them came with him. In the kitchenette he unscrewed a light bulb over the sink, found a plastic-handled cooking fork in the table drawer, touched its tine to the light socket. There was a sputter of spark; the lights in the apartment went out.

Louise cried out, in the bedroom. "The fuses!"

Pedley screwed the blub in swiftly. "Got a flash?" He struck a match.

"Top drawer beside the sink," the girl called.

Ludwig came to the door of the kitchenette, holding a cigarette lighter cupped in his palms. "Got it?"

Pedley opened a drawer. "No."

"Candlestick—hurricane lamp—on the bookcase, Luddy." The girl was still in the bedroom.

Pedley struck more matches.

Ludwig hurried away. "I can fix the fuse with a penny." The hall door opened.

Louise came in the kitchen. "I *know* it's there! I used it this morning; the top of a salt-cellar rolled under the refrigerator."

"Yair?" He wondered if Stella was supposed to have taken the flashlight to the factory with her, too. "Let's get that candle." The matches went out. She brushed against him in the darkness. For a moment she was very close, soft and warm and fragrant of mignonette, then she was past, modestly excusing herself: "Oh, I'm *sorry!*"

The draught from the open door made the matches he lit flicker and waver. The light in the hall was out, too; it had been on the same fuse.

Louise was nearly at the bookcase by the door, when she cried in sudden fright: "Luddy, you all right?"

No answer.

She screamed.

The marshal whipped out the pocket flash which never left him in waking hours. He reached the door.

Ludwig Gretz lay crumpled on the landing at the top of the stairs, blood streaming from his forehead.

His father had vanished.

CHAPTER V

SEARCH FOR VENGEANCE



LINGING herself on Ludwig, the girl began to sob hysterically:

"He's dead. His father killed him. Oh, *Luddy!*!"

"Cut it!" Pedley found the fuse box with his flash. "He's alive." He unscrewed the old fuse, balanced a copper penny on the end of it, screwed it back in the socket. Lights flashed on. "He got a bang on the head, but he's a long way from dead. Get up."

She wiped blood off the sales manager's forehead with her sleeve. "He's been hurt *terribly!* See?"

The Marshal put his flash on the wound. It was over the left temple. Sandy hair, matted with gore, hung loose from a flap of torn scalp.

"What makes you think his old man slugged him?"

"Who else could have? There was nobody else here."

"You were here. In the hall with him."

"*Ohhhh!*" She sprang up, fled to the living room.

He went after her. She bent over the phone:

"Operator—operator! Get me the police!"

He slapped his hand on the connection-bar. "Calm down. I'll call for help if I need it."

"POLICE!" she screamed, and clawed at his eyes.

He caught her wrist. She bit his hand. He grabbed a handful of her long dark hair, bumped her head against the wall. Louise fell against the telephone table, overturning it. She collapsed in a screeching heap on the floor.

"Don't think I fall for the hysterics." He wiped away the blood oozing from his hand. "That fake faint put me wise to you."

She glared up at his solemn, bony horse-face, at the soot smudge across his forehead, the smoke inflamed eyelids, the spark-burn on his jaw.

"You've no right to leave Luddy out there dying, in the hall—no matter what you think of me!"

"He isn't dying. Scalp wound, possible concussion. Nothing more. I'm going to take him to the hospital. Before I do, I'd like to know a couple things."

She waited, biting her lips.

"Why would Ludwíg's father want him out of the way?"

Louise stood up, shakily, smoothing down the front of her pajama jacket. "Mr. Gretz must think Luddy suspects him. Of setting the factory on fire."

"For insurance?"

"It's more'n he'd get if he closed out the business, which he'll probably have to do if Joe and Stella go after his customers. Especially the policy covering our stock. All those items we didn't move last season are a dead loss, can't ever be sold. They're the kind of dolls nobody wants any more. They were five, ten years ago, but Mr. Gretz won't acknowledge they're not in demand any more."

"Yair. Other thing: why'd you stage the phony passout?"

"I thought you were going to ask me about the office, our accounts and like that. I didn't know what to tell you without making you suspicious of Mr. Gretz." She held her arms out dejectedly, let them drop to her sides. "After what he just did to Luddy, I don't see why I should hold back anything."

"Don't."

"I think he's been rooking the business—it's a corporation, you know—for weeks. Getting ready to go into bankruptcy, owing a raft of money, while he's been drawing out ridiculous amounts of cash for expenses. I can't say anything to him about it, of course; he runs the company. But nobody draws out twelve and fourteen hundred dollars a week just to entertain buyers, the way he's been—"

"Would the fire cover up those withdrawals?"

"If our books, in the safe, were destroyed."

"Mmm. You got a gun around?"

"No." She was frightened again.

"Well. When I go, lock your door. Keep it locked until I get back here."

"Why? Do you think Mr. Gretz—"

"Never can tell what might happen if those fuses blow out again. Stay with your door locked, *no matter who wants in.*"

HE HOISTED the unconscious Ludwíg over his shoulder in the fireman's carry, waited until he heard her lock the door behind him, went down to the car.

The receiving interne at the hospital said: "You're really wheeling 'em in tonight, marshal. This one from the same fire?"

"In a way. Indirect casualty."

The interne examined the laceration. "Our old pal, the blunt instrument, eh? You want him in the Detention Ward?"

"No. He probably won't be here long, after he gets over the concussion, will he?"

"I'd say not, unless there are internal complications. Reason I asked, the other one got away."

"*H'ho?*"

"Long drink of water. One who came in with the Vrenn girl."

Pedley didn't wait, strode to the waiting room. It was empty.

The patrolman was in the dispensary drinking coffee out of a paper cup.

The officer was contrite. "Jeeze, Marshal, that's the first one who ever got away on me. I—"

"How long ago?"

"Three-quarters of an hour. Just after you left. Word came down from upstairs the Vrenn kid was dead so I hadda break it to this guy. He took it very hard. He turned the color of this cup, grabbed my arm. Thinkin' he was gonna do a foldo, I put both arms around him, to hold him up. And the son-of-a-buck slugs me with a fist that musta had a jackknife in it or somep'n—because *click!* Next thing I know, one of the docs is bustin' one of them ammonia things under my nose."

Pedley growled. "I feel worse about it'n you do. I should have told you he might fly off the handle." He punched the officer lightly on the upper arm. "We won't enter that one on the Pee Dee or Eff Dee activity

reports, hah?"

The cop was mightily relieved. "I didn't send out any alarm for him, not knowin'—"

"No. Just forgets it." Pedley hurried back to young Gretz, went through the sales manager's pockets, found keys, a wallet with an identification card:

Ludwig K. Gretz
11 Emeraldale Drive
Seaview Village,
Brooklyn, N. Y.

There was a number for Karl M. Gretz in the Brooklyn phone book, but nobody answered.

The marshal kept the blinker going on the sedan all the way to Brooklyn Bridge and across.

Seaview Village was a development of stone and timbered Tudor "cottages" in Bay Ridge. Emeraldale Drive was a wide strip of cement, a narrow patch of lawn leading from the Parkway. Number Eleven stood apart from its neighbors on a shrubby-secluded double lot. The house was dark.

He rang the bell, heard its muffled jangle inside, waited.

After a minute he found the right key, opened up. He was feeling for the light when a harsh voice said:

"Just come in and close the door."

Pedley switched on the light.

Joe Brenkow sat on the arm of an overstuffed chair in front of a stone fireplace. He was still in his shirt sleeves. His eyes were deep sunk in their sockets and as bloodshot as if he hadn't slept for a week. An automatic was clamped in his right fist, planted halfway between his hip and his knee.

"Housebreaking?" The marshal shut the door. "Ten years for that, when it's entrance at night."

THE superintendent regarded him sullenly. "What happens to me in the next ten years doesn't make a damn bit of difference, after tonight."

"Think that's the way your girl'd have wanted it? What's the picture? Aiming to settle accounts with Gretz?"

"Aiming to do something you can't prevent. But maybe it's a good idea you're here, at that. Go over there. Park your pants."

"I'm too nervous to sit," said Pedley,

moving toward him. "You chase around to three alarmers like I do, couple of times every day, watch kids being carried out in body bags, old women jumping from fourth floor windows—"

"Skip it!" Brenkow snarled savagely. "An' stand still."

"I'm coming for that gun. My nerves are too shot to sit under a muzzle while you fix to blast somebody." The marshal sauntered toward the fireplace. "You can drop me. I can't stop you. But the blues would. They'd have you by morning. That cop at the hospital has your description cold."

"Hold it, now! I'm tellin' you!" Brenkow showed his teeth, began slowly to back away.

"Stop playing Bogart!" The marshal changed his tone to one of exasperation. "Think I'm going to let you gun the first person you imagine's guilty!" He closed in.

Brenkow lashed out with the pistol barrel.

Pedley seized the man's wrist. The .45 let go with a bark that echoed hollowly through the big living room. Plaster sifted from the ceiling. They wrestled around until a mild voice from the front door demanded:

"Move him around so I can get a shot at him, marshal."

CHAPTER VI

MORE CLUES



BRENKOW gawked at the stocky, round-faced man in the sheep-skin-lined shortie. The newcomer stood halfway in the door, with only his right side and shoulder showing. His right hand was in the jacket pocket.

Pedley broke the superintendent's grip, put the pistol in his overcoat pocket, pushed Brenkow into a high-backed armchair.

"You and the Marines!" Pedley scowled at his deputy. "Nick-of-time neddle! Who's that you got on the hook there?"

Ed Shaner stepped into the living room, pulling the toy manufacturer after him. "Something I found crawling around in the ashes over at the Plastoy Building, coach.

He was speling some yatada about owning the joint, so I thought I'd bring him home and see if he was leveling or not. I tried to get through to you on the shortwave, but no could connect."

Gretz burst out: "He arrested me. For what? Trying to get in my own safe! In my own building!"

"Trying, hell." Shaner shoved his felt hat back off his forehead, planted his fists on his hips, cop-style. "You were up that ladder and into the safe before I could get across the street to you."

Pedley said: "What were you after, Gretz?"

"My insurance policy." The toy manufacturer was livid with anger. "Is it a crime?"

"Sort of—to keep a policy in the factory where it might burn up." The marshal watched Brenkow. The super bent his head forward in a half crouch; his eyes narrowed. "You get the policy?"

"It's gone! Stolen!" Gretz was almost incoherent. "It's ruin absolute for me. *In that policy I was keeping twenty thousand-dollar bills*, unnerstand? My whole cash reserve! Gone!"

"Most people stuff their wad into a mattress nowadays," Shaner observed. "Once in a while you find some old-fashioned dodo who keeps his dough in a bank."

Brenkow said softly: "You're a rotten liar, Gretz. You were damn near broke. The business was next door to bankruptcy. You made me let good operators go because you had trouble meeting the payroll. You never had any twenty thousand reserve. You're trying to make it look as if Stell rifled your crummy strong box, now that she can't call you a liar. Well, *I can!*" He started up. "I'll call you worse than that, and prove it!"

Pedley shoved him down on the chair.

Gretz cried: "You got it wrong, Joe. That ain't it, at all. Stella couldn't have opened the safe, any more than you could. Unless one or the other of you got the combination from Louise. She was the only soul living who knew that combination, outside myself."

Brenkow's fingers curved into the position which would be used for throttling. "Don't lay it on either of the girls. You had the

combination. You had the insurance. You could have come up those stairs into the office without my knowing it. You were the one told Luddy that by tomorrow Stella wouldn't have any job."

"Would I rob myself," Gretz shouted, "of my own money, godsake?"

Pedley cut in. "Never mind the robbery. What we're after is the person who set a fire that killed a girl."

Gretz quieted. "No! Stella dead? No!!"

"She was half-dead," the marshal went on brusquely, "before the fire started. Someone had knocked her over the head with a flashlight; there was a sliver of glass in her hair that came from the flat lens of a two-battery flash. They're holding an autopsy on her now."

Brenkow sprang at Gretz.

Shaner stepped in, stuck out a foot. The superintendent went sprawling. Gretz cowered against the door.

Pedley hauled Brenkow to his feet. "Under arrest, Brenkow."

The super snarled: "What for?"

"Resisting an officer," Shaner answered. "Next time you try it, you'll need to visit a dentist for a new set of choppers."

"Take 'em out to my car," the marshal ordered. "We'll run 'em down to BFI offices and get some statements on paper."

THEY marched out to the sedan.

Shaner said: "What about my bus?"

"You can come back for it. We're going to stop at Jane Street to pick up another customer."

Gretz said: "What? Who? My Ludwig?"

"Your son," Pedley flicked on the blinking red eye, "is in the hospital with a cracked cranium. Miss Aymar seems to think you know about that."

"Know?" Gretz wailed. "What I know is my factory's burned, my business ruined, my money stole, now my boy is dying! It's the end of the world, for me!"

Brenkow, sitting on the other side of Shaner in the back seat, commented fiercely: "What do you think it was for Stella?"

On the way to the bridge, the shortwave began squawking. It was Barney reporting from the Broome Street lab:

"That burned cork, boss—the boys say it contains traces of—wait a minute, I got it here—pe-lar-go-nate. They said you'd know what it was. Are you getting me, boss?"

Pedley switched over: "I hear you, Barno. Put it all together, it spells murder. That is all." He signed off.

He parked down the block from 312, herded Brenkow and Gretz up the narrow stairs, Shaner bringing up the rear.

There was a light under the door of Apartment Three, but no one answered his knock.

It didn't make any difference. The door wasn't locked.

He went in.

There wasn't anyone around.

Louise's black and gold pajamas were on one of the twin beds; a pair of slippers lay on the floor. Pedley looked in the closet.

"Chick's flown the coop." He described her to Shaner. "But if you hop over to Saint Vincent's, you ought to find her roosting close to young Gretz."

The deputy brightened. "Want me to take her downtown?"

"Bring her back here. And watch yourself. She's like one of those dolls. Highly inflammable."

"Goodie."

Pedley went to the door with him, gave him further orders. "I'm not kidding. She's hard to handle."

"Way I like 'em." Shaner went downstairs.

The marshal stooped, scraped something which sparkled like a diamond chip from the door sill, returned to the living room holding the bit of glass on his palm.

"Another piece of the flashlight lens." He let them see it. "Picked it up where you knocked Ludwig cold, there at the top of the stairs, Brenkow."

The superintendent rubbed the back of his left hand across his mouth as if to keep himself from answering.

Gretz's eyes bulged. "After how I trust you, Joe! After all I done for you! This is the way you repay me!"

Pedley put the splinter of glass into a second cellophane envelope and stuck it in the tobacco tin. "He didn't mean to bop your son."

The manufacturer's mouth hung open stupidly. "What?"

"He came here after you. Right, Brenkow?"

The super went to the door of the bedroom, stood with his back to the marshal. "You've got it all figured out. You go ahead and tell it."

"I can't tell what went on in your mind." Pedley moved toward the bedroom door.

"But I'd say that while you were in the hospital waiting room, you decided Gretz knew how that fire started. So after you slugged the cop and got away, you came over here. You knew your way around this place; you'd been here often enough with Miss Vrenn."

"That's so," Gretz contributed eagerly.

PEDLEY came close up behind Brenkow.

"You had a bad break when you got here. The lights were out in the apartment; a fuse had blown. There wasn't any light in the hall. You weren't making any more noise than you had to, but you made enough so that Mr. Gretz, sneaking down, kept out of your way on the landing."

Gretz hunched his shoulders, held his hands up in front of him. "Him, I passed, there in the dark? *Gott in Himmel!*"

Brenkow swung around, a pucker of awe creasing his forehead. "Crysave, believe you have got it all doped out!"

"Yair? Wait. When somebody came out of the apartment onto the landing with a cigarette lighter in one hand, you slugged first, looked second. Soon's you saw it was Ludwig, Miss Aymar called to him, and you beat it downstairs as quietly as you could, not wanting to get pinched for assault on the wrong party."

Gretz breathed: "Me—he meant to kill." Brenkow nodded deliberately. "Do it yet, if the state doesn't take care of you first."

"Joe, listen! To you I swear—"

"Shut up." Pedley made a brusque gesture. Time for that, later. You stuck to your idea, Brenkow—went out to your employer's home, broke in—"

"Broke, hell. His cellar door was unlocked." The super gave a short, ugly laugh.

"Okay. You waited for him to come home.

I saved you from murdering the wrong person."

High heels clattered on the stairs. The hall door burst open. Louise halted in the doorway, huddling her leopard coat around her, in consternation.

None of the three men moved. Pedley said drily: "Been out for a walk?"

She turned to Gretz.

"I've been over to the hospital—to Ludwig. He phoned—I mean a nurse phoned for him—he'd left his overcoat here. There were some things in it he wanted, so I took it over to him . . ."

"Yes, yes." Gretz bobbed his head. "Is he all right?"

"They had to take five stitches in his scalp." She peeked out of the corners of her eyes, fearfully, at the marshal. "But there's no fracture or anything. They said he was lucky. He'd been hit terribly hard."

Pedley said: "You're lucky, too. Running around at night with a murderer breathing down your neck. I told you to stay in here with your door locked."

She fussed with her hair. "Yes, but Ludwig—"

Brenkow stalked to her, head lowered, bull-like. "Lou, did you ever give the combination of the safe to Stell?"

"N-no. Of course not."

"Or to me?"

"W-why, no. Certainly I didn't." She retreated, scared. "Did anybody think—"

"He did." Brenkow's finger stabbed accusingly at Gretz. "He claims somebody stole twenty thousand bucks cash out of the safe. I say he's a damn liar." The super paused, watching Pedley.

The marshal had his head tilted back, his nostrils distended, sniffing.

Gretz whispered: "Smoke?"

Then they saw it. A thin, wavering wisp of blue gray, wreathing into the lighted doorway, curling lazily toward the ceiling.

"FIRE!" Louise dashed for the door.

Pedley caught her. "Cut it, now. Keep quiet."

Brenkow was tense: "No fire-escape in this building! We're trapped."

Gretz moaned: "This place, it'll burn like a box of matches!"

The girl was frantic. "Aren't you even going to phone in an alarm?"

A siren wailed nearby. Pedley went to a window, ran up the venetian blinds, pulled up the sash. Twin red eyes loomed at the end of the block.

He went out in the hall, called down:

"Everything under control, Shaner?"

The deputy's voice boomed up the staircase. "Damn good thing you told me to keep that extinguisher handy. Come down and see what I did with it."

CHAPTER VII

GUILTY MAN



SHANER stood by the foot of the stairs. The smoke came from a wadded ball of newspapers and wrapping paper. It had been pulled apart, doused with the half-gallon brass extinguisher the deputy swung at his side.

"Sucker had that stuck right under the stair-risers, coach. With that stairwell for a flue, wouldn't have taken three minutes before the whole joint'd have been chimneying up like a rubbish basket."

"Nick of time neddie, again." But Pedley smiled, wearily. "Played it right, Ed. We could have been barbecued up there if you'd missed."

The booted laddermen clumped in from the street with hand torches and axes. "What you got, marshal?"

Pedley moved around the clump of paper, touched the figure on the floor with his shoe. "I guess you can list it as a malicious false alarm, boys. He's malicious enough, God knows."

One of the hook-and-ladder men stooped to peer at Ludwig. "Would he be the rat who put Bill Schacter on the Critical list, now?"

"He's got more than that to account for." Pedley clamped a hand on the manufacturer's shoulder. "Leave him alone."

"But, look—he's hurt!" Gretz yelled at Shaner: "You hurt him, when he's a hospital case, already!"

The deputy held up his left hand. "

shoulda stayed in the hospital instead of bonfiring a dwelling-house, comin' at me with this when I caught him red-handed." The open blade of the jackknife glinted wickedly in the firemen's torches.

The sales manager groaned, put his hands to his mouth, rolled over on his side. One lapel of the overcoat, which Pedley had seen in the closet upstairs, was soggy with blood. "Get up," Shaner commanded.

Ludwig stumbled to his feet. He wore his trousers but beneath the open front of the coat showed the white of a hospital night-shirt. He had his shoes on, but no socks.

Pedley looked him up and down. "Must have left your private room in kind of a hurry." Ludwig hawked up blood, cursed him thickly.

"Stand against the wall." The marshal shoved him back ungently, knelt with his pocket flash at the sales manager's trouser cuffs. "Here we are." He picked out a third fragment of glass. "When you brained Miss Vrenn in the office, your flashlight—one you swiped out of her kitchen drawer—busted. Some of the glass went in her hair, stayed there until we found her in the Women's Room where she'd crawled, half dead, to get away from the heat."

Ludwig started to kick at the marshal's head, saw Shaner's threatening movement with the extinguisher, changed his mind.

Pedley stood up, fished out a third cellophane envelope, stuck the sliver of glass in it. "Bit of the lens came out of your cuff when Brenkow bopped you upstairs on the landing. Makes it come out nice and neat for the Prosecutor. Exhibits A, B and C."

"Luddy," his father begged. "Tell me! Tell me it's lies!"

The sales manager grimaced.

Pedley said: "You know it's no lie, Gretz. Hell, you suspected it yourself. That's why you scramoosed out of here in the dark, so I wouldn't put the quiz on you about Ludwig. Don't doubt you wanted to see what he'd stolen from your safe, but it wasn't because you mistrusted any of the others; it was because you never trusted your own son. Not even enough to let him have the combination to the safe."

"But *why*? Why did you, Luddy?"

Louise moved out from behind the newel post where she'd been crouching. "You always liked Stell so."

Pedley answered. "He didn't like her so much after she got sore at him, told him she was going to quit Plastoy and—what was it, Brandy-Burner? Did she threaten to phone your father that she'd seen you opening the safe, or at it while it was open?"

LUDWIG spat at him, his face showing the savage ferocity of a cornered animal.

"That's close enough. Either she came right out and accused you of stealing that twenty thousand or you were afraid she knew you had it and might spill the whole keg of nails to your father. You saw a chance to stop that and cover up your own tracks, —it was a cinch your old man was going to give you the bum's rush if he did find out you'd cleaned out his cash reserve. So you made some excuse to Miss Aymar—"

She turned away, began to sob.

"Don't take it so hard. I don't say you'll be charged as an accessory. Not up to me. But if the D. A. asks me, I'll say you helped me." The marshal gathered some of the charred newspaper for his collection. "Brandy Boy probably gave you some line about wanting to go after your roommate, when she stormed out of the apartment, to make it up with her, bring her back—maybe with Brenkow."

She sobbed more loudly.

"Yair. Well. Then, he must've cooked up some explanation when he got back here. You were scared I'd start asking questions about that, so you pulled that stage faint. I can't claim any credit for thinking something was rotten a lot closer than Denmark. Then when somebody'd been nipping cognac, and there wasn't any bottle around. What'd you do, Brother Bug? Give it the heave-o in an ash barrel down the block? Or any flashlight, when you said you had one . . ."

Brenkow breathed like a man in agony. "If I'd known, I would have killed you, Luddy."

"I told you," Pedley reminded him, "you were lucky you didn't murder the man you meant to."

The super made heavy apology. "I am

WHERE DID IT COME FROM? HOW DID IT GET HERE?

WHAT IS IT?

THE THING

from Another World!

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sorry I tried to kill you, Gretz."

"Better you should have," his employer answered dully. "Now, what have I got to live for?"

Brenkow turned on the Marshal. "If you knew all this, why didn't you tell me—out at his house?"

"Didn't, then, fella. It's hard to get proof that'll stand up in court in arson cases; juries don't send a man to the death house on the basis of some burnt bits of wood. And sometimes you get proof that isn't really evidence. Like this." Pedley jingled a bunch of keys on his palm. "Miss Vrenn's keys. He used 'em to unlock her desk, after he'd knocked her out, in the office. Then like most people, he automatically put the keys in his pocket; it gets to be a habit. He never thought of throwin' 'em in that drawer where he spilled the brandy. I found 'em in his pants when I took him to the hospital. That's why he tried to cremate us just now; he knew I had these; he'd remembered his mistake—and missed 'em."

Ludwig's hand darted out with snakelike

speed. He slapped at the marshal's hand. The keys went flying. Shaner lifted the extinguisher. The nozzle hissed. Ludwig clapped his hands over his eyes, howling.

Pedley wrenched him around. "Don't want to get that nice overcoat all messed up." He stripped the coat from the salesman's shoulders, felt in the pockets, found nothing. But at the bottom hem, between the outer fabric and the lining, there was a crackling. He used the jackknife, slit the cloth, extracted the crisp oblongs of green. There were nineteen of them.

"What'd you do with the other one?" Pedley stuck the money in his tin box. "Hand it to one of the hospital orderlies to take you down in a service elevator?"

Ludwig shuddered. The extinguishing vapor had chilled him. He looked ridiculous in the floppy nightgown tucked in his pants.

"What's the matter—cold?" The marshal didn't seem too sympathetic. "Don't worry, you'll be hot enough, one of these days."

He pushed the salesman toward the red sedan.

A PROPER YOUNG WOMAN

or,
**NEVER
POISON
YOUR
HUSBAND**



*A True
Story of Crime*
by
LEO MARR

EVERY murder might be called a bad guess—the victim having guessed wrongly about his associates. In the case of Anne Wells, there were a whole flock of bad guesses. . . .

Anne Wells was a very comely young woman who flourished in the town of London around the year 1589. This was, in a way, the high point of her

youth; she was of marriageable age, she was pretty and well behaved and well reported, and, most dear to the feminine heart, she was besieged by eager suitors.

Well up front in this race for her affections were two prosperous young goldsmiths, John Brewen and John Parker. They were friends, but as has happened before and since, a woman

came between them.

Impartial friends and Anne Wells' own family, rated Brewen as a solid citizen, a dependable bread-winner and a good Joe, in addition to being perfect husband material. Parker, on the other hand, was distinctively a phony and about as trustworthy as a bank teller with a charge account at the local race-track. Anne's friends and family boosted Brewen, whereat the fair maiden preferred Parker in the way of females the world over. Brewen showered her with attention and gifts—and being in the jewelry business, he could really do some showering. She took his gifts, but turned up her nose at him and made merry with Parker.

Parker Asks Gifts Back

This made Brewen sore. He took it for awhile, but finally called upon the girl for a showdown.

"As you despise me so much," he said hotly to her, "I'll have back my gold and jewels."

"Stay for it," she answered, this being the local equivalent of "you can whistle for it, kid."

Brewen was no doormat. Seeing that Anne was turning into a first-class gold-digger he lost his temper and went out and got a cop. Returning with the constable, he demanded that Anne be arrested for keeping his jewels and golds.

The fair damsel, being of respectable stock, nearly swooned at this and backtracked so fast she nearly fell over her own feet.

"Nay, John," she cried, "I will marry thee. Let this action fall and think not ever the worse of me afterward and I give thee my solemn promise that I will wed thee."

Brewen's temper vanished. He had reckoned her lost and suddenly saw victory in his hands. He was a little overcome at his good fortune. He instantly dropped the charges and made exultant preparations for his marriage, little

knowing what a sorry bargain he had struck.

When Parker heard the news he was furious. He made a violent scene and stormed at Anne and reproached her for faithlessness to him.

"I am sorry for the promise I made," Anne confessed, "but there is no help for it now. You will not marry me."

"I am not in estate to marry," Parker fumed.

"And what of thy child?" she reproached him. For she was indeed in a delicate condition through this same making merry with Parker.

He would have none of her reasons. He was mad with jealousy and even before the marriage he began to urge Anne to do away with Brewen. If she wouldn't break her promise, if she would go through with the marriage, then Brewen must be disposed of, so Parker could possess her again. And so infatuated with him was the girl, that at length she consented.

There is a kind of woman who invariably picks the man who is worst for her—and the worse he is to her, the more she clings to him. Such a woman was Anne Wells Brewen.

She had been married about three days when, under Parker's repeated urgings, she began to plan her poison campaign against her husband.

Her passion for Parker was so all-consuming that it turned her indifference toward Brewen into active hatred. He took her the night of their marriage and the experience revolted her so that she vowed never to go near his bed again. For excuse she said she would never live in his poor sorry excuse of a house and after that first night she went out and secured lodging near the place where Parker lived. She also refused to use the name of Brewen and continued to call herself Anne Wells. If Brewen wanted her back, she told him, he would have to get her a better house.

The separate lodgings gave Parker an unparalleled chance to visit her for various purposes, among them being the

one of discussing the elimination of John Brewen. He brought her a small packet.

Brewen Hands Over Poison

"This is a strong, deadly poison," he told her, "whose working makes speedy haste to the heart, without any swelling of the body or other sign of infection. This will rid us quickly of yon Brewen."

Anne Wells had gone a long way in three days. From a simple, if pretty and spoiled girl, she had hardened into a steel-hard, unscrupulous woman consumed with a passion so terrible that all moral scruples seemed consumed in its blaze. She took the poison and went to her husband's house where she greeted him with a smile and gave him a pleasant good morning.

"I had thought," she told him, "to make you this cold morning a mess of sugar sops, for it is the week before Shrove-tide."

Brewen, who had reconciled himself to neglect, was touched by this sudden, unexpected attention.

"Aye, marry, with a good will, wife," he said. "And I take it very kindly that you should so think of me."

"Alas," replied she, "you must judge me unkind indeed could I not find it in my heart to do so small a matter for you, being so lately married."

With which pleasant repartee, she went with smiling face to prepare the Judas feast, the poison secreted in her garments. Having made the sugar sops, she sprinkled it liberally with the poison and brought him a porringer which she set down momentarily while she put the posnet on the fire again. As she rose, her coat swung wide and upset the porringer which fell and spilt its contents all over the floor.

"Out!" she cried. "Clumsy—I have spilt as good a mess of sugar sops as ever I saw."

"Is there more?" Brewen asked, feeling her disappointment and loathe to shatter this unexplained good mood

which seemed to have taken her.

"Aye, there is more,—enough for two portions as good as this—or I will make them as good."

"Then why grieve?"

"It grieves me to see anything so good unluckily cast away."

"Vex thee not," he said. "Thy ill luck go with it."

"Amen," she said piously, but having a quite different idea about her ill luck than he did. Then a new idea occurring to her, she said, "John, I pray you, would you fetch me a penny worth of red herrings? I have an earnest desire to eat some?"

"Marry, and with a good will," he said eagerly.

Makes More Sugar Sops

While he was gone she hurried back to the kitchen and like the witch in Snow White, hurriedly made up a new mess of the sugar sops and spooned out three portions, one for her husband, one for herself and one for a little boy she had brought along for company on the walk. Her husband's, however, got special attention, she seasoned it liberally with the same poison.

When he came back she passed out the portions and all three began eating, quite merry and friendly.

A little later, John Brewen was attacked by violent pains and griping in the stomach.

"Wife," he said, "I feel not well."

"How so?" she asked in mock surprise. "You felt quite well before you went forth, did you not?"

"Yes," he said, and some suspicion that the food might somehow have been spoiled entering his mind, he asked, "Are you well? And the child?"

"Indeed," she said. And the little boy answered that he felt all right.

But Brewen became rapidly worse. "I am sick to my very heart," he groaned. Then the vomiting began—of a violence which seemed to tear the unfortunate man apart.

"Wife," he groaned, "help me to my bed."

His pains increased and he continued vomiting and retching, with such strain as to leave him limp and exhausted and all but dead after each seizure. And Anne Wells, the tender, delicate maid who had married him, stood by and watched without a touch of pity.

The hour grew late and she was impatient to go.

"Stay with me," he pleaded, but she said she could not. So she left and Brewen was alone through the longest and most horrible night of his life. All night the pains wracked and tore him and he never ceased retching and gasping with an effort which seemed to break him up inside.

The next morning neighbors found him and took a message to Anne that he was very sick and asking for her, but the message had to be repeated before, grudgingly, she came. She did not try too hard to appear in grief, even when he weakly reproached her for leaving him alone.

"Wouldst have me forsworn?" she said angrily. "Did I not take an oath I would not stay in this house one night until you had gotten me a better?"

Brewen groaned. "Aye," he agreed, "but stay with me now Anne, for I am not long for this world."

"Now God forbid!" she cried and feeling victory in her grasp, made the effort to show some sorrow. She even went to the kitchen and made him a caudle with sugar and spices, which of course he could not eat, even though it presumably had no poison in it.

John Brewen died that day, a Thursday, and was buried the next. He was well liked and sincerely grieved by those who knew him and they sympathized with his unfortunate widow. It was agreed that she had not behaved herself too well towards her husband, but this was attributed to ignorance rather than malice. They suspected nothing of evil intent.

As the months passed, it was discov-

ered that Anne was with child, and presently she was delivered, but there were none who suspected it was anyone's but John Brewen's child. For some reason, the infant was not strong and died soon after its birth.

Anne Is Free

Anne Wells Brewen was now as free as before she had ever met John Brewen. Freer because she now had her own lodgings and was not even under the supervision of her family. And now her door was open to John Parker and the illicit passion, nourished by murder and secrecy, flamed in all its purple overtones.

Something happened to these two. As Anne Wells had grown hard and unscrupulous and determined, so Parker became more evil and lustful and unrestrained. The basic wolfishness in the man came to the surface. He used Anne as though she were a harem slave, brutally venting his desires upon her, and becoming so harsh and demanding that she dared not cross him in anything he said. Moreover, he was so jealous of her that if she ever glanced at another man, he would threaten her with his knife.

He ordered her about like a slave, he spent her money and demanded more, and if she ever denied him anything he would slap her around, or draw his dagger and flash it before her eyes, threatening to thrust her through. And the meeker she became and the more she tried to please him, the more arrogant and difficult to please did he grow.

Two years went by. And though all this time Anne had begged him to marry her, he had refused. Now she was with child again. And this time there was no husband to conveniently tag with the blame.

"Now I am undone," she wept. "If you will not from desire, for my credit's sake marry me and suffer me not to be a pointing mark for others and a shame among my neighbors."

Her tears only annoyed Parker. "You'll not appoint me when to marry," he snarled. And then he added the perfect, the finishing touch. "If I were minded to marry, I would be twice advised how I did wed with such a strumpet as thyself!"

All of Anne's spirit was not broken.

"Strumpet is it?" she cried. "And have I ever been strumpet but for thee? Woe that I ever knew thee! It is thou and no other man who can triumph in my spoil and yet art thou knave enough to refuse to make amends for thine own fault. My love has thou sufficiently tried, although I never found any by thee. Strumpet is it? Who made of me a strumpet?"

Parker Reproaches Her

Parker laughed. "Wouldst marry me to the end that thou mightest poison me as thou didst thy husband." This was the unkindest cut of all and Anne reeled before it. "For that cause," Parker rushed on, "do I mean to keep me as long out of thy fingers as I can, and accursed may I be if I trust thee or hazard my life in thy precious hands."

"Arrant beast," she breathed. "What did I do that thou didst not provoke me to do? If I poisoned my husband who gave me the poison, who cajoled me into giving it him? Shameless one, it had never been done but for thee. It was at thy direction did I minister it unto him. It was for thy sake did I perform so cursed a deed, woe is me."

This was only one of many similar quarrels in which the temper of the antagonists overcame their natural caution. And Anne's desperation drove her to accusations and statements which were very revealing. Their voices penetrated the walls of the lodgings, the neighbors heard and were aghast. It was only a matter of time before some shocked and righteous character trotted to the police and unloaded a full account of what had been overheard.

No suspicion had ever attached itself

to Anne Wells Brewen in the matter of her husband's death. But this was evidence of a very hot quality. So the local constabulary arrived and carted off Anne Wells and John Parker.

They were questioned separately, Ann by Alderman Howard and Parker by Justice Young. Both denied ever having made any statements which would seem to cast suspicion upon the manner in which John Brewen had met his death. Both denied there was anything irregular in Brewen's death or in their own association.

And then they pulled that oldest of all police tricks on Anne Wells. They told her that Parker had confessed. He had thrown all the blame on her. Now was the time to tell her own story if she didn't want to be saddled with the entire crime.

Let it be said in Anne's defense that the trick was not as old then as it is now. And thousands of detective stories hadn't been written using it, so that every reader of the whodunits is long familiar with it. It was probably brand new to Anne Wells. Besides, she was a simple girl, as mentioned before.

Anyway, she swallowed it. She broke down and confessed the whole miserable plot and implicated Parker as her accomplice. Parker's rage when he was told, can be easily imagined. The man had been giving way to temper more and more anyway and there is little doubt that he was rapidly becoming dangerous to the community.

At the hearing it was determined that Anne Wells was indeed with child, as she claimed. She was taken to the country to wait her time and with some sense of the dramatic, Parker's trial was postponed for the same period until she could be brought back and tried with him. He languished in prison while Anne waited out the months under guard in the country and until her time had come and the child was delivered.

Then she was brought back to London and prison. They were tried in the

sessions hall near Newgate. The trial was pretty much a cut and dried affair. Anne's confession was on record and she did not try very hard to repudiate it. Parker's furious denials helped him not. Anne Wells was sick at heart and soul now and there is little doubt she knew her life had run its course. Whether she felt remorse or not the record does not state. Perhaps she did. Perhaps the months away from Parker had cleansed her of the curiously unhealthy passion which had so perverted her character. But she did crave an end to the whole sorry mess.

And she got it. The conviction was speedy and the judge's sentence as brutal as the times demanded.

"I condemn this woman to be carried to Smithfield and there burned alive and the man to be hanged in the same place before her eyes."

And the sentence was so carried out. Anne Wells had the doubtful pleasure of seeing John Parker kick out his life before her as she watched, just before the hungry flames crawled up to claim

her. The execution was carried out on the 28th of June, 1592, just two and a half years after they had murdered John Brewen.

There is probably a moral here somewhere, but I can't imagine what it could be. John Parker and Anne Wells had carried off a crime which was perfect enough—it was simple, quick, neat, it left no damaging clues lying around and no one ever suspected them. If they'd had sense enough to keep their mouths shut, no one would ever have suspected them. Maybe we'll have to fall back on the oldie—murder will out. The moralists of Anne's day put it somewhat differently.

"The Lord give all men grace by their example to shun the hateful sin of murder," wrote Thomas Kyd, "for be it kept never so close and done never so secret, yet at length the Lord will bring it out. For blood is an incessant crier in the ears of the Lord and He will not leave so vile a thing unpunished."

Divine justice is sometimes very slow, but it can be awfully thorough.

ADVERTISEMENT

Do We Have to Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

That Power, he says, can transform the life of anyone. Questions, whatever they are, can be answered. The problems of health, death, poverty and wrong can be solved.

In his own case, he was brought back to splendid health. He acquired wealth, too, as well as world-wide professional recognition. Thirty-nine years ago he was sick as a man could be and live. Once his coffin was bought. Years of almost continuous tropical fevers, broken bones, near blindness, privation and danger had made a human wreck of him, physically and mentally.

He was about to be sent back to England to die, when a strange message came — "They are waiting for you in Tibet." He wants to tell the whole world what he learned there, under the

guidance of the greatest mystic he ever encountered during his 21 years in the Far East. He wants everyone to experience the greater health and the Power, which there came to him.

Within ten years, he was able to retire to this country with a fortune. He had been honored by fellowships in the world's leading geographical societies, for his work as a geographer. And today, 39 years later, he is still so athletic, capable of so much work, so young in appearance, it is hard to believe he has lived so long.

As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. A-18, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

DYING to MEET YOU

A Novelet by G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

CHAPTER I

ANTICIPATION IS SWEET

MR. S. NOLAN HART had spent ten years of his life traveling over a geographic area bounded on the north by Lansing, on the south by Kokomo, on the east by Fort Wayne, on the west by Danville. You would not think he would be particularly thrilled about entering a hotel room.

In fact, up to the present time, Mr. Hart would have readily admitted that hot and cold running water, Gideon Bibles, chambermaids, an over-abundance of steam heat, and wild parties in the room next door, taken collectively, were not attractive to him.

But this time it was different.

This time he was out of his territory. Secondly, he was not selling fountain pens, as usual. Thirdly, he was a one-man reception committee for a supposedly young and presumably attractive woman.

On leaving home, he had been so intoxicated with the prospect of exploring what was for him, untrammelled ground, that

Edith, the sweet girl he had married, added to her usual caution: "And don't get into any trouble, Sam."

Contemplating Sam Hart for a moment, this seemed a needless warning. He was in every way middle-of-the-road. He had just passed thirty, was medium height, blond, mild mannered. The beginnings of a tummy attested the fact that he was getting the most out of modern ease and comfort.

Had he been endowed with sufficient foresight, he would not have undertaken this journey at all. He would have sickened at the glimpse of the future and taken to bed with an ice bag at his north pole, and a hot water bottle at the opposite extremity.

Mr. Hart began his middle-road idea of a good time as soon as he alighted from the train. His first thought was for his family.

He spent an hour shopping for a chrome electric egg-cooker for his wife, and a toy G-man outfit for Junior. Next, he disregarded Edith's scruples to the extent of two

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Popular Detective*



WHEN A penmanship contest spells death for the winners,

S. Nolan Hart, resourceful salesman, turns the tables on mobsters by dotting the "i" and crossing the "t" in justice!



Wenny's knee kick to the chin did the most damage

beers. Returning to the hotel early, he courted indigestion with a lobster. He could, he convinced himself, diet tomorrow.

There remained, to climax the day, the meeting with Riccara Borden, who had won the Hart Pen Handwriting contest.

On the following morning, he would escort Miss Borden to the factory where Hart Pens were made. There she would be given a banquet, a certified check for a thousand dollars, and a ticket covering a trip to Hollywood.

TWO nights ago, this Riccara Borden had been the subject of some discussion at the Smiths' house. The Smiths were Mr. and Mrs. Hart's Friday night bridge opponents. Ted Smith had done some nudging and winking. He made sly remarks about Sam Hart's approaching duties.

In fact, Ted Smith's imagination was the fertile ground from which sprang the vision of Riccara Borden as a lovely flower in full bloom. For all anybody knew, she might have been the possessor of cross eyes and a hair lip. People who have character, in their handwriting, are oftentimes not creatures of great beauty.

Sam Hart had his suitcase open on the hotel bed. He was trying to find a spot for the electric egg-cooker, when the telephone rang. He let it ring until he hung up his top coat, sagging and shapeless because of Junior's G-man outfit, which was in its pocket.

A certain effect of bustling, big business may sometimes be affected by letting a phone ring a bit before answering.

Sam then crossed the bedroom, entered the living room, and picked up the insistent instrument. He lowered the pitch of his voice a half dozen tones, and admitted that he was S. Nolan Hart of the Hart Pen Company.

"And I," said the feminine voice, "am Miss Cornelius Pickard of the West Croydon District School. I teach history there. Perhaps you remember my entry in your handwriting contest? I have a serious complaint to make regarding your contest, Mr. Hart. It seems—"

"Yes, but—" Sam Hart stabbed futilely.

"—that you might conduct your contest on a fair basis. I saw in an advertisement, a portion of the winning contest letter, and I am quite certain that the handwriting was a deliberate forgery.

"I was in Europe two years ago and one of the high-points of my tour came when I saw some of the original letters written by Marie Antoinette to her mother. I distinctly remember Marie Antoinette's handwriting, and I am positive that your winning letter was copied from it!"

"Yes, but I didn't have anything to do with the contest," Sam Hart interposed. "And the judge was a handwriting expert from a criminology laboratory. I am only here to—"

"But Mr. Hart, as president of an organization like the Hart Pen Company, don't you feel that you ought to be informed about such things? I most certainly do. Please do not imagine that I am disappointed because I did not win the contest. This is for your own good, and I really believe—"

"Please, Miss Pickard!" Sam Hart interrupted. "I do not deny that there is a similarity in names, but I am not the president of the company. And I am merely here—"

"Well, of all things. Of *all* things, Mr. Hart!" Miss Pickard hung up.

Sam Hart replaced the receiver, blew up his cheeks, expelled the air with a whistling sound through puckered lips, which properly expressed his relief at the termination of an annoying call.

He explored his pockets for cigarettes, found none, and was about to carry his search into the bedroom when the phone rang again. He looked at it suspiciously. That might be Miss Pickard waiting to unburden fresh grief concerning the handwriting contest, so he would ignore it.

But he didn't. He picked up the phone and said "hello" pleasantly.

"Mr. Hart?" a woman asked. This was not the Pickard voice.

"Yes."

"This is Riccara Borden. I'm in the hotel and I'm dying to meet you. It's dreadfully important. More important than you could possibly imagine."

"Yes, of course." Sam Hart smiled at the telephone. "I want first to congratulate you. You have taken a room at the hotel?"

"Yes. But you don't understand. This isn't about the contest. On my entry blank, I tried to tell you, or rather the judge of the contest, that—"

The voice faded.

"Miss Borden. Hello, Miss Borden!" Sam Hart scowled at the phone. "Hello." The break of the connection made his ear ring.

SAM HART called the hotel desk. "I was speaking to Miss Riccara Borden, who has a room in the hotel. Someone cut us off," he said.

"One moment."

Sam leaned back against the wall and waited.

"There is no one by the name of Riccara Borden registered, Mr. Hart. You were speaking with someone in Suite One-hundred-sixty-four. I will ring that number for you."

The switchboard girl rang 164 persistently for five minutes. There was no response.

Somewhat puzzled by all this, Sam Hart returned to his bedroom, removed his suitcase from the bed, put it under the window. The dusky upward flush of neon signs in the street sixteen stories below relieved the darkness. Outside the window was an ornamental stone parapet about twelve inches in height. There starlings had gone to roost and were noisily complaining of their accommodations.

Sam Hart looked at his watch. Mr. Cole, president of the Hart Pen Company, had written to Riccara Borden informing her to contact S. Nolan Hart at his hotel at eight o'clock. It was a quarter past eight now and there was no news from Riccara Borden except for that mysteriously interrupted call from Room One-hundred-sixty-four.

Sam Hart sat down on the edge of the bed. He contemplated a visit to Room One-hundred-sixty-four.

Something not quite right had occurred to Riccara Borden. Why was it that there was no one by that name registered in the hotel?

A nasty wind wailed out of the east. It

was rattling windows and keeping the starlings awake. Sam Hart got up to telephone Room One-sixty-four again. Halfway across the room he stopped. The circular glass over his dresser mirrored the window, a square of blackness tinged red. Directly in the middle of it, something white fluttered in the wind.

Sam's mouth became dry. He turned around slowly. His blue eyes widened. He swallowed. Something was standing outside his window on that narrow parapet.

He decided the thing couldn't be human until, above the yowl of the wind, he heard a desperate, pleading voice call: "Please, please. Let me in. Oh, God! Let me in!"

Sam stumbled to the window. While he fumbled with the window catch, he got a glimpse of a woman's face and hands pressed close to the glass. She had on some sort of long, shapeless robe of brilliant yellow splashed with black.

That was all he saw before the catch gave way, and he quickly pulled the window open.

The woman had evidently been leaning heavily against the glass, and when he jerked the window up, she tottered backwards.

Sam yelled. At the same time, he lunged halfway out of the window, caught the crazy garb she wore in both hands, pulled her toward him. Limply she fell forward, her brow striking the top of the window sash before she crumpled.

Sam gathered her into his arms, carried her to the bed, put her down. Her eyes were closed, their lids blue. She had nice, even features, no rouge on her cheeks or lips. Her blue-black hair was disheveled.

"Wake up," Sam pleaded. "Here, you can't do that. You can't go to sleep here!"

Then the frantic thought came to him.

He seized her wrist, felt around for the pulse. Either she didn't have any, or he was testing the wrong place. He'd never tried to take anybody's pulse before.

Sam put his hand against her chest. He could feel her heart beating. She was alive, thank heaven. She had probably just fainted when she felt herself falling backwards, or possibly she had been knocked unconscious when falling against the window.

Sam suddenly realized the girl was wearing a yellow and black shower curtain, and his jaw dropped.

"Oh, lord!" he gasped, his brain suddenly numb. He stared dully at her right leg, exposed between the folds of the shower curtain. It was white and bare. The girl wore nothing but a flimsy dance set and the shower curtain from a hotel bath tub.

Sam Hart thought then of Edith, his wife. Why in the name of Heaven wasn't she here with him? He had a feeling that this wouldn't have happened if his wife had been here.


Yes, that was it. Thought returned on a flood of panic. This was one of those rackets he had heard of vaguely. This was some sort of a blackmail scheme.

At any moment an irate and probably fictitious husband would come barging in, and accuse him of compromising this woman.

Wind whipped through the window and snapped the curtains. Starling feathers flurried into the room like big black snow flakes. Sam Hart went to the window and closed it. The falling sash caught a downy feather against the sill. A draft blew up through the crack to make the feather wriggle like a butterfly caught by one wing.

CHAPTER II

TROUBLE FROM A WINDOW



AM HART crossed the bedroom, closed the door behind him. He looked across the living room at the phone. No, he wouldn't trust the phone. This mustn't get out, even to the girl at the switchboard. What he wanted was the house detective.

His mind's eye formed a picture of a monstrous man with excessive chin, a tilted cigar, and a derby hat. That was what a house detective should look like, and he couldn't remember seeing any such individual lurking in the lobby.

Or did he want a house detective? Maybe the girl was in trouble. Somehow Sam Hart couldn't conceive of a woman walking along a narrow parapet sixteen stories above the

street just to blackmail somebody.

No, what he wanted was a doctor. Sam Hart went to the hall door, opened it, stepped out into the corridor. He locked the door, and put the key in his pocket. No bell hop or chambermaid was going to enter that room with a strange woman there, if he could help it. He started dazedly down the hall.

Twenty feet from his door, a woman came around a quirk in the corridor and spotted him through her rimless glasses. She was rather a large person who had attempted to conceal her proportions with a tailored gray suit, black silk stockings, and flat-heeled shoes. A white silk stock nursed her heavy chin. Her gray hair pushed her silly hat to an insolent angle. She eyed Sam with apparent disapproval, and pounced.

"Mr. Hart. You *are* Mr. Hart, aren't you? I was standing beside you when you registered. I don't suppose you noticed. However, we did have a telephone conversation a little while ago. I am Miss Pickard, history teacher at the West Croydon district school. I entered the contest."

"Yes," Sam said. "If you will please excuse me, I am in something of a hurry. A matter of vital importance. Some other time, Miss Croydon."

"Miss Pickard, if you please!" She snatched at his arm. "I simply must see you about that contest, Mr. Hart. I tell you I have irrefutable evidence that there was fraud in your contest, and I intend to expose the whole matter.

"I am sure that if I had the original copy of the entry made by your first prize winner, I could prove it. Do you happen to have that entry, Mr. Hart? What was the prize-winner's name? A foreign name, wasn't it? I am sure that the winner was someone who had access to those letters of Marie Antoinette."

Sam sighed. Years back he had made it a practice never to argue with a school teacher. He fumbled in the inner pocket of his coat, and took out the narrow-folded sheet of paper, Riccara Borden's entry blank. He had been given it to assist him in identifying Riccara Borden in case he ran into someone who might pose as that lady and

thus attempt to obtain the prize.

By that time Sam was fully convinced of Miss Pickard's sincerity, so he handed the entry to her. "I must have that back," he cautioned.

"Yes, yes. Just as soon as I have had time to examine it. I will let you have it back later this evening."

Miss Pickard, her brow puckered, was shaking out the folds of the paper with one hand, while with the other she gripped Sam's coat sleeve.

"Now I want to point out a few things to you, Mr. Hart. Notice the broken loops of the —"

"Please," Sam interrupted. "I told you I was in a hurry. I am. I'm trying to get a doctor."

Miss Pickard removed her insistent hand. She surveyed him with unblinking eyes.

"Mr. Hart, just what is the trouble? A little over-indulgence at the table, no doubt. I have the very remedy for an upset stomach. I always did say, Mr. Hart, that by the time you're past forty you are either dead or you are your own doctor. Now this remedy I always keep in my purse—"

Sam Hart drew a deep breath, turned away from the woman. "Miss Pickard, I am *not* sick. Understand that? I am not interested in finding a doctor for myself." He stopped. "Nonetheless, I must find a doctor. It's urgent!"

LOOKING over Miss Pickard's hat, Sam Hart noticed that a middle-aged man and a young woman were standing a few feet from them. They had evidently just come from the elevator. The man's eyes met those of Sam Hart.

"I beg your pardon, but I couldn't help overhearing. I happen to be a doctor, Mr. Hart—I believe that is your name. If there is anything I can do, I will be happy to be of service."

Miss Pickard turned around. She gave the man a glance. The girl deserved her detailed inspection but not her audible sniff. She walked past them toward the elevator, the contest entry clutched to her breast.

The girl accompanying the doctor was dressed in a Chartreuse suit and hat. Her

chestnut hair made curling bangs along her forehead. She was vividly made up. Her small, red mouth looked dry and somehow hard underneath the well-painted outline.

Her companion was gray-templed, exceptionally lean-faced. The line of his jaw was sharp, and he had hard sparkling eyes. A horizontal scar created the illusion that he was double chinmed, peculiar on so thin a face. He wore what Sam Hart took to be rather expensive clothes.

"Borden is my name," he said, extending his hand. "And this is my daughter. I thought it well to accompany her to the hotel."

"Riccara Borden?" Sam Hart gaped a little at the girl. She was all Ted Smith had pictured her, and something more. She was attractive, but she didn't quite fill Sam Hart's conception of beauty. He wondered about her lips, whether the warmth of any man's lips could have melted their painted hardness. When she smiled, it was with her lips only. Her eyes remained cold.

And then Sam got his mind back to the business of the mysterious girl in his room.

"This is embarrassing, you will understand in a moment. Please come this way." He led them to his door, which he unlocked. Glancing first at the bedroom to make sure it had not been opened, he stood aside for them to enter the living room.

Sam waved the doctor and his daughter to chairs, but remained standing himself. His hand rested on the back of a davenport, fingers picking absently at the upholstery.

"A short while ago, a young woman came to the window of my bedroom," he began.

"The window?" Dr. Borden scowled heavily.

"Yes, there's a gutter and a stone parapet just outside the windows on the top floor. It seems incredible, I know, but she evidently walked from some other room to mine on just that tiny ledge. She—she isn't dressed very much. I haven't the slightest idea why she came to me. I was afraid she was going to fall off that narrow ledge."

"Naturally." Riccara Borden was sympathetic.

"So I opened the window and pulled her into my room. I think she hit her head

on the sill and was knocked unconscious. I put her on the bed, and went immediately in search of help."

"You haven't notified anyone yet, anyone except us?" Dr. Borden inquired. "My anxiety on this point is for you, Mr. Hart. I realize just how devilishly awkward this must be."

"You are the only persons I have told," Sam said. "I wish you would look at her and get her out of here as soon as possible. You see," Sam's voice wrung its fingers, "I am a married man."

"Furthermore, I am rather well thought of by my employer; Mr. Cole, our president, is an uncompromising Puritan at heart. If this were to become public, I would in all probability lose my position."

"If the publicity took the unlovely turn it is apt to, you mean," Dr. Borden said. He stood up, indicated the bedroom door with a nod. "In there? I'll have a look at the lady. Devilish awkward for you, Mr. Hart." He opened the door, went in, and closed it after him.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Although he was not looking directly at Riccara Borden, Sam was quite conscious of her. She spoke after a moment.

"I'm sorry this had to happen, Mr. Hart."

"Well, I am too." Sam Hart sat down on the davenport. "However, no matter what happens, it will in no way interfere with the celebration planned for you, and the award of the prize."

RICCARA BORDEN passed her eyelids over her eyes, unveiled them, put them on Sam Hart. They were pretty potent stuff. He thought vaguely that his wife wouldn't like her.

"I wasn't thinking of that. I was thinking of you, Mr. Hart. Really I was."

The bedroom door opened and Dr. Borden came out. His lean face was white, the scar on his chin standing out lividly. He fumbled with his handkerchief and passed it over his face.

"Mr. Hart," he said hoarsely, "will you step this way, please."

"Wh-hat's the matter?" Sam's eyes seemed to protrude from their sockets. He

got up and went into the bedroom, the doctor following.

Sam tiptoed to the edge of the bed. The shower curtain was cast aside, and it was no longer yellow and black. It was yellow and black and red! Sam took one look at the girl, and sickened. He closed his eyes and hung on to the bedstead. Against the black curtain of his eyelids, the indelible image of the knife-slashed body persisted.

Sam stuttered. "She—she's not dead, is she?"

"My heavens, yes!"

"Murdered!" Sam gasped. He thought desperately: This wouldn't have happened if Edith had been here!

"Fiendishly murdered. And your room was locked, Mr. Hart. That's the devil of it."

Sam gaped at the doctor. "What are you getting at. You don't think I—"

"No, no. Of course not. The window, was it locked?"

Sam remembered he had not latched the window after pulling the girl into the room. He looked at the window to make sure. The latch was open.

The doctor came around the side of the bed and dropped an arm over Sam's shoulder.

"Frankly, you don't appear the sort of a man to do this thing, but it's rather difficult and awkward, isn't it?" He led Sam to the door, and they went out into the living room.

Riccara Borden stood up. "What's happened. Dad, what's the matter?"

"She's dead. Murdered." Sam said to Riccara Borden. "He thinks I did it." He jerked a thumb at the doctor.

"Murdered?" Riccara breathed. Her gloved hands clasped nervously. She sent an anguished glance at her father. "But how could you suppose that Mr. Hart—why, it's too fantastic!"

"No, no," Borden insisted. "I did not say that Mr. Hart did it."

Sam's hands went out in a pleading gesture. "Look. It was like this. I heard somebody at the window. I turned around. It was this girl. I went to the window, opened it—"

"I know," Borden said. "Let's not be—"

come panic stricken about this thing. The girl's dead. Some fiend killed her. You say you left her on the bed alive but unconscious. I believe you, Mr. Hart. Riccara believes you. But," he gnawed off the word emphatically, "what jury would believe it?"

"Jury?" Sam repeated. "Good lord! They wouldn't arrest me. Why I was out in the hall talking to you and to that school teacher when it happened."

Borden smiled. When he smiled, the white scar on his chin drooped at its ends.

"No one knows what you did to the girl before you came out into the hall, Mr. Hart."

"But I was looking for a doctor. Would I have killed the girl and then gone and looked for help?"

"It's a point in your favor, but then a clever murderer might have constructed just such an alibi. You understand? Let's sit down and consider this calmly."

"But—but—"

"Sit down, Mr. Hart," Riccara urged. She sat down on the davenport and patted the cushions beside her.

SAM sat down on the edge of the davenport and raked his fingers through his hair.

"What you need," Borden said, "is a good lawyer. I'm not in this city very often, but I have heard a great deal of an Attorney Wycoff. I think I have his address." He consulted a small notebook frowningly. "You go to Seven-hundred-eleven North Street and tell everything to this Wycoff. He's a brilliant man and will be of the utmost assistance to you."

"But—but I haven't done anything," Sam insisted. "Why not just inform the police?"

Borden shook his head.

"My dear sir, you evidently have had no experience with the police. Once you turn yourself over to them, it will be too late to get a lawyer and you will be in serious trouble."

NEXT ISSUE

WHAT PRICE MURDER

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"The police will beat a confession out of you, and railroad you into the chair. Don't you know that? Have you ever been arrested before? I mean, of course, on a minor traffic violation, or something of the sort."

"Never!" Sam shook his head. "In all my traveling, I've not so much as dented a fender. Why, my reputation as a conservative individual—"

"Some of the most conservative appearing men have committed some of our nastiest murders, Mr. Hart. I am afraid your reputation will not be sufficient. Your wisest move is to go to this lawyer at once. Don't you think that's best, Riccara?"

"Oh, the only thing to do, of course," Riccara said. "I've heard that Wycoff is truly remarkable. If I were in your position, I would certainly do as Dad advises, Mr. Hart."

Sam took a long breath. "All right. I'll do it. It seems queer, but I don't know what else to do. Oh, lord! If Edith were only here!"

Sam Hart rose. "Dr. Borden, I wonder if you would get my coat and hat. I can't—I just can't—"

"Of course." Borden got up and went toward the bedroom. He gave Sam a pat on the shoulder. "Everything will be all right, Mr. Hart. I am sure it will."

He reappeared a moment later with Sam's coat and hat, and held the coat for Sam to make several futile stabs at the sleeves.

Sam finally got the coat and hat on. He was shivering with a nervous chill. Dr. Borden and Riccara went with him into the hall.

Borden had to remind him to lock the door behind him.

"Just leave your key at the desk downstairs," Borden said. "And you may trust my daughter and myself to be absolutely discreet about this matter."

Impulsively, Sam seized the doctor's hand and pumped it. "It's white of you, Dr. Borden. Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Dr. Borden said.

Riccara Borden put out her hand, gave him her lip-smile. "The best of luck, Mr. Hart."

They went down in the elevator together.

CHAPTER III

PRESENTING "MR. WIENNY"



LEAVING his key at the desk, Sam hurried out to the front of the hotel. The doorman hailed a cab.

Sam gave the driver the North Street address and got into the back seat. He held his coat tightly about him in an effort to quiet his quivering body. Something jabbed relentlessly into his side, and when he looked at it, he shivered all the more.

The goading thing was the G-man outfit in his coat pocket. It made him think of Junior and Edith. He saw them as they would be sitting in the courtroom, looking toward him confined in the dock. He saw Junior's little face, twisted, anxious and tired. And Edith with a madonna-like sadness, her lips soft and quivering.

He tore his thoughts back to present emergencies. The cab had just rushed past the corner of North and New York Streets. Just beyond, a dilapidated hotel sign swung on a rusty hinge. "Beer on tap" was spelled out in neon lights through a grimy window.

No, this wasn't a nice neighborhood. Not the sort in which he would have wanted to raise Junior. Then Sam tried to rationalize the neighborhood with the fact that some of the finest medical and legal practices flourished in the worst parts of a big city.

The cab stopped in front of a barnlike frame house, dark except for a dim light struggling through a ragged net curtain and a film of dirty glass in the door.

The numbers 711 were vaguely discernable against the dark green weather-boarding. Sam Hart got out, paid his fare. The cabby left him alone on the sidewalk.

The porch that fronted the dwelling was decidedly on the down-grade. Sam's feet groped, as though he expected to fall into a bottomless pit at any moment. He got to the door, knocked on the glass. The noise startled the silence of the night.

Sam could see a man approaching through the glass of the door. The man seemed to increase in height with every step. There

wasn't sufficient light to see the man's face clearly. The outline of his head was distorted by a shock of uncombed dark hair. His figure was slightly stooped, probably because of his height. Slim-waisted, his body gradually thickened from the belt to immense shoulders.

"Yeah?" he said hoarsely.

"I'm looking for Mr. Wycoff, the lawyer."

The big man turned his head. "MacFarlan," he rumbled to someone inside, "here's this guy wants to see a mouthpiece."

"Tell him to come in," the unseen voice replied.

"Come in."

Sam Hart hesitated. "Is Mr. Wycoff here?"

"Yeah. Sure. You come in and I'll call him."

"I—I don't mind waiting out here." Sam was reluctant.

The big man pounced, seized Sam by the fullness of his coat front, dragged him through the door, swung him around, kicked the door shut. He barked. "When I says come in, I don't mean stay out."

Sam looked up at his face. Big, square teeth gleamed between parted lips. He continued:

"Why, I wouldn't keep a dog out on a night like this. I should sa-ay not." He brought a hand down on Sam's shoulder. Sam twisted around, tried to brush the hand off. It wouldn't brush, and he was shoved through dark, dusty portieres drawn close over an open doorway.

In a lop-sided chair beside a table, sat a small, lean, white-faced man. His lips dangled a cigarette, and his eyes squinted through biting smoke. "Hi-yah," he said. His was the voice of the man addressed as MacFarlan. He was cleaning an automatic pistol.

"You want to see Wycoff, huh?" MacFarlan said conversationally.

Sam Hart swallowed. He didn't say anything. Behind him, the big man grabbed him by the back of the neck and squeezed until Sam thought his spine would snap.

"Can'tcha talk, huh?" he growled.

"Take it easy, Wienny. He'll come across." Cigarette ash snowed down on

MacFarlan's vest. He went on polishing his gun.

"Mr. Wycoff isn't here just now," he said. "Sit down," MacFarlan invited with a wave of his gun at a chair.

"I'd rather stand," Sam said, edging out of Wienny's way.

WIENNY lunged after him, took him by the shoulders, and shoved him toward the chair.

Sam gritted his teeth, squinted his eyes, hooked up his right fist to Wienny's middle. It was a pretty good punch. Sam's eyes burned with the pain in his fist. Wienny let go of him, took a couple of steps backward, bared his teeth.

"You lousy little punk, Im goin'—"

"Cut it, Wienny," MacFarlan said. "Cut the back alley stuff. Mr. Hart's a gentleman. Quit mauling him. He's got brains. He's going to come across." He smiled.

"Go on and sit down, Mr. Hart. Don't start anything with Wienny. You couldn't lick him. I never met a guy who could. It wasn't sense, wading into Wienny."

Sam went over to the chair, unassisted by Wienny, and sat down.

"Cigarette?" MacFarlan reached for a pack, and offered a match. MacFarlan lit another cigarette. "We got a few simple questions to ask you, Mr. Hart. We want to know how much Ricky told you."

Sam kneaded his knuckles and looked at MacFarlan.

"I guess you've made some mistake. I don't know anybody by that name."

"Riccara Borden," MacFarlan repeated. "You know her. What we want to know is how much she told you."

"About what?" Sam scowled.

"MacFarlan, you gotta work on guys like this," Wienny said. "He's holdin' out on us."

MacFarlan ignored Wienny. He smiled at Sam.

"Riccara Borden tried to communicate with you in some way, Mr. Hart. We got to know what she told you. Not that it makes much difference, because I don't think you're going to make trouble.

"Ricky wouldn't try to get to the cops,

I know that. She knew what would happen to her if she did. But you having something to do with this darn fool contest Ricky won, I figured maybe she told you something."

"She didn't," Sam said.

"She couldn't told the world on that darn contest entry blank," Wienny growled. "I told you you was a dope when you mailed the thing for her. I said—"

"Shut up, Wienny," said MacFarlan. "There wasn't any harm in her interesting herself in that fool stunt. I put the contest blank in the envelope and mailed it myself. I knew she was getting kind of cool toward me, and I was watching her plenty."

"If you'd laid off that torch singer, Ricky wouldn'ta got sore at you," Wienny said. "And we'd be sittin' pretty right now instead of chasin' around tryin' to keep Ricky's trap shut."

"Nuts!" MacFarlan said. "I'm talking to Mr. Hart here. Mr. Hart, I guess you know you're in a bad spot. We are about the only guys that could do you any good.

"I hear there was a dame in your room. It didn't look like you treated her nice. It looked like she was stubborn. It looked like you were steamed up and slashed her up until she looks like minced meat."

"Don't." Sam was miserable.

"Don't what? Is this kind of offensive to your ears, Mr. Hart?"

"Just don't. I didn't have anything to do with the killing of that girl. I know who did. You did, or maybe that—that skunk." Sam pointed to Wienny.

Wienny started across the floor. "Lemme rough him up, Mack. Hear what he called me?"

MacFarlan interrupted. "Cut out the kid stuff, Wienny. You cut it out, too, Mr. Hart. This is strictly legitimate business talk. I never killed the girl. I don't think Wienny killed her. I think you killed her, but we won't argue.

"The point is, the coppers are going to think the same way I do for the first time in my life, and what are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know. Just let me get out of here, that's all I want. I don't know anything about any of this."

Sam took out his handkerchief and blew his nose. Over the linen, his blue eyes looked from MacFarlan to Wienny. Wienny made gritting sounds with his teeth. That always made Sam nervous, like running his fingernails down a piece of slate.

"Listen, Mr. Hart, Wienny and I and some other guys would like you to do a little favor for us." MacFarlan got up and went to a closet. He opened it and took out a black Gladstone bag.

"We want you to deliver this to a certain agent tonight," he said. "I think you'll agree, when I say if you don't, we could call in the cops. They'd be glad to see you, I guess. Murder gets around fast these days of radio. Crime don't pay, you know, Mr. Hart."

SAM rested his hands on his knees and leaned forward in the chair.

"I think you two are a couple of crooks," he said.

Wienny laughed.

"He thinks we're a couple of crooks, Mack!"

"And," Sam continued, "I'm not running any errands for a couple of crooks. Nor am I afraid of the police. In fact, I think I'll call them myself!"

He stood up and started toward the table for the phone. Wienny blocked him off with wide-spread legs, and arms bowed like an ape's. Wienny weighted his left fist. And for a moment Sam Hart was stricken with something like buck fever.

Wienny's blow came a long distance, otherwise Sam wouldn't have coordinated his nerves and muscles in time to duck. When he ducked, it was simply a matter of hinging at the knees so that Wienny's fist went over his head and knocked his hat off.

Wienny shot in his right to Sam's middle. Sam saw that coming, too, and covered with both hands. The thing that did the principle damage was Wienny's knee kick to the chin as Sam doubled over.

Sam fell back, hit the chair he had been sitting in before he hit the floor. Wienny stooped, got hold of Sam's right foot, started to twist it off at the ankle. Somebody knocked at the door, and Wienny let go of Sam's foot. Sam's legs fell back to the floor like sticks of wood. He lay still, sick, dead tired, afraid.

He wasn't particularly interested, but he did see MacFarlan shove the Gladstone back into the closet.

"Put Hart in the basement," MacFarlan said. "You stay down there and keep him quiet. I don't like the sound of that knock."

Wienny stooped from the waist, hooked his fingers in the lapels of Sam's topcoat, heaved Sam to his feet. He held Sam by the collar and seat of the pants and rushed him out of the room to the top of the basement stairs opening off the kitchen. He turned on a light in the basement from a switch at the top of the stairs. Then he kicked Sam from behind.

Sam tried to make his legs catch up with the acceleration the kick had lent him. He spun half around, clawing at the wall.

His body then performed a series of stunts none of which were clearly recorded in his mind, but which left lasting impressions upon his body. He hit his head on the edge of a step and his forehead gashed open. Lying on his face on the floor, he smelled blood.

Wienny came down the stairs quietly and slowly, like a pall bearer approaching a casket.

"Hit me, will you!" he whispered.

Sam wriggled over on his side. He drew his knees up toward his body. He blinked up at Wienny. He swallowed.

"Yeah," he said. "If you'd fight fair, I'd hit you again."

"Tough guy, huh?" Wienny sucked his lower lip in between his teeth and bit it. Then he hauled back his right foot and kicked Sam in the back. Sam groaned, but he didn't know it. He didn't know anything.



CHAPTER IV

JUNIOR COMES TO THE RESCUE



NO doubt about it, Sam Hart was extremely surprised at being alive. He opened his eyes gradually, expecting Wienny to kick him again. But he didn't see Wienny. He saw the basement wall and a couple of half-rotten, wood washtubs sitting on a bench, with a wringer clamped on the edge of one of them.

Wienny, he told himself, was on the other side of him. He lay still, listening, trying to hear Wienny's breathing. He didn't hear anything but a ringing in his ears, and the distant mumble of voices.

Sam turned over on his back. Something gouged into his side, and he pictured a broken rib. But the jab of pain wasn't so bad, because he hurt so much all over. He sat up, hands flat on the concrete floor in an effort to stop its slow, rotary motion. He blinked, and that hurt his face. Blood from his forehead was forming a tight, painful mask.

Sam prodded himself with his fingers. Sore, yes, but he didn't think anything was broken. The thing that gouged painfully into his side was Junior's G-man outfit, still wedged into his coat pocket. He pulled it out with some difficulty and looked at the box.

He saw Junior coming home from school once, crying, his nose bloodied. Junior was undersized and the bigger kids at school made his life miserable.

Sam Hart remembered arguing with Edith about what had happened to Junior. Edith wanted Sam to go out and give the kids who had punched Junior, a licking. And Sam wouldn't do it.

He'd told Edith that might hurt Junior for life. It would make Junior lose his self-respect, Sam had argued.

After Edith had finished calling Junior "you poor baby" Sam had taken Junior aside, and had a heart to heart talk with him. How had it started?

Well, it had started with the big kids throwing Junior's hat in some fresh tar on

Piermont Street. And Junior had called the kids names. Maybe he'd called them skunks. And the kids had mobbed Junior then. No, he hadn't fought back. They'd punched him in the nose and hurt him.

Who punched you, Junior? Well, it was Willie Martin, the big kid. The biggest kid in the whole room.

Okay, Junior, tomorrow at recess, you go to Willie Martin. You tell Willie you owe him something. Then you hit Willie straight in the nose. Hit him just as hard as you can.

But Willie would hit back. Well, maybe he would, but Junior was to hit Willie good and hard anyway, and keep right on hitting him.

That did it. Junior was sent home from school for fighting. Willie went home with a bloody nose. Willie's dad came over to Sam Hart's that night with Willie hanging on to his coat.

Willie wasn't scared now. Maybe in later years he'd get scared. Anyway, Willie would never forget his dad, nor forgive him for humiliating him that way.

Sitting on the floor of the basement, looking at the package he had for Junior, Sam Hart remembered all this, and grinned. Then he got up on his feet. He didn't think he could stay on his feet very long with the floor turning under him, but he managed to stagger to the wall and brace his back against it.

Then he opened Junior's G-man outfit. It contained an imitation automatic that would shoot water, a pair of handcuffs that could be opened with a hairpin, a magnifying glass, and a little nickel badge that said "Chief G-Man" on it.

Sam took out the water pistol. It seemed realistic enough, but it seemed absurdly small when he thought of scaring a man as big as Wienny with it. Still, if Wienny got a stream of water in the eye, it might distract him long enough to enable Sam to hit him with something.

Sam dropped the rest of the outfit in one of the wooden tubs, started looking around for a water outlet. There was a cistern pump near the tubs, but it was rusty and looked as though it hadn't been primed for months.

ABOVE the pump was a shelf on which stood a cardboard box and a bottle, both so dusty, he could make out neither the label of the one nor the contents of the other. He picked up the box and lumps of blueing fell out onto the floor.

Sam put the box back, took the bottle and uncorked it. He sniffed at the mouth of the bottle and tears blinded him for a moment. The bottle contained ammonia water.

Sam poured some of the ammonia into the top of the box the G-man outfit had come in, and before the cardboard could soak up the stuff, he sucked the water pistol to its capacity.

Sam turned his attention to the clothes wringer. He wanted something to hit Wienny with. He tried to take off the wringer handle but it was welded to the drive shaft.

The tension knob at the top of the wringer was about three inches in diameter and made of cast iron. He unscrewed this knob.

The threaded shaft was cast into the metal and came off with the knob. If he gripped the shaft, the heavy knob would stick out the thumb end of his fist. An upper cut with that ought to produce about the same results as brass knuckles.

Holding his water pistol in his left hand and the wringer knob in his right, Sam tiptoed across the floor and up the basement steps. The door at the top was closed, but he could hear MacFarlan and Wienny talking. MacFarlan was saying:

"That dick knows something, Wienny. He don't know enough, but he sure poked around plenty. He even made me open that suitcase. It was darned lucky my clothes were piled on top of the stuff. We get caught with that, and we're finished."

"Sure," Wienny said. "But as long as they don't catch us with all that pretty dough, what's our worry?"

"We got to eat, don't we? And we got to get out of this town. We got to pass that stuff to our distributor, and blow. We can't pass the stuff because that dick's got his eye on us.

"We got to get this Hart guy to do it. You got to make him do it, Wienny. He wasn't scared of our gag to bring the cops

in for that killing. Think you can persuade him to see things our way?"

"Huh!" Wienny grunted. "Can I make him see things our way! I can make him see plenty."

"Don't croak him, Wienny. He won't do us any good dead and he might do us some harm."

"I'll hit him easy, but in the right places." Wienny's heavy footsteps shook the floor.

Sam hurried down the stairs as fast as his aching legs would take him. He backed against the side wall of the basement, both hands behind him, hiding his puny weapons.

Wienny came down the stairway like something Frankenstein had made. He looked at the spot where Sam had been and then his eyes roved to where Sam was now. He bared his teeth.

"Well, buttercup," he said. "Well, well!" He started over toward Sam.

"After your nap, you see things different, huh? You'll kick in with us, huh. Or should I swab up the floor with you?"

Sam steeled himself to the attack.

Wienny came closer. Then he stopped smiling. "What you got behind you, guy? Come on, let's see what it is."

"This." Sam pulled out the gun, raised it to eye level.

Wienny croaked out an oath, and his right hand shot up toward his shoulder, but he didn't pull a gun. Sam didn't let Wienny's hand stop at the conveniently located gun butt. Sam squeezed the trigger of his squirt pistol and the needle of ammonia water hit Wienny in one eye.

Both of Wienny's hands went up to shield his face. His mouth twisted like the mask of tragedy on a theater program. He doubled over.

Grinning, taking plenty of time, Sam clenched the cast-iron knob, and swung his right fist. It landed on the side of Wienny's face. Wienny staggered backward, still fighting the ammonia in his eyes. His voice roared. He stumbled, sat down on the floor.

"Get up, Wienny." Sam was surprised by his own calmness.

Wienny got up, though it seemed his knees were hinged with damp dish towels. He opened his eyes, saw Sam boring in, his

right arm waving like the blade of a windmill.

Wienny tried for his gun again, but the wringer knob landed on the top of his head. He went down hard this time, and there was a look of semi-permanence in the way his hulking body sprawled out on the floor.

SAM bent over him just long enough to pull the automatic from Wienny's shoulder holster, then he put aside his squirt gun and the wringer knob, and ran for the steps.

He could hear MacFarlan moving around in one of the rooms. Sam opened the door, stepped into the kitchen. MacFarlan came through the kitchen door.

"That guy give yet, Wienny?" he asked. "It sounded like—" He saw Sam then. His shrewd eyes narrowed, flicked down at the gun in Sam's hand.

"Put your hands up," Sam commanded. "I just licked the devil out of Wienny." He laughed a little hysterically.

"Now, Mr. Hart, there's no reason to act that way. You got me and Wienny all wrong." MacFarlan was trying diplomacy.

"I got you and Wienny dead to rights, you mean. Put your hands up, or do I let you have one in the—in the stomach?" Sam stepped closer to MacFarlan.

"Well, if you feel that way about it," MacFarlan said, "I may as well give up. I shouldn't quibble with anybody who can lick Wienny. My gun's in my shoulder holster."

Sam nodded. "I know." He reached out to take MacFarlan's gun. MacFarlan, however, did not keep his gun in the same place Wienny did. So, he kicked up at the gun in Sam's hand, back-stepped, drew from his hip pocket.

Sam knew what he had to do then. He did it. He tugged on the trigger of Wienny's automatic. The blast of it deafened him. The recoil nearly broke his wrist.

MacFarlan lunged forward, his gun in his hand. Sam yelled, turned, started to run—not that there was any sense in trying to outrun a bullet. Something behind him plunked to the floor. There was silence.

At the kitchen door, Sam turned around slowly. He looked toward the floor where MacFarlan was lying, arms outstretched,

one hand still holding his gun. Blood was oozing from the side of MacFarlan's head.

Sam scrambled through the kitchen door into the dining room. He ran into the living room, then the hall. He opened the front door and yelled: "Police! Police! Help!"

Sam pointed Wienny's automatic into the air and kept pulling the trigger until there were no more bullets in the gun.

CHAPTER V

HAIL THE CONQUERING HERO



BIG man, almost as big as Wienny, came running up on to the porch.

"Here!" he grabbed Sam Hart's shoulder. "Stop that yelling. What's the matter with you? Put down that gun."

Sam backed, pointed the empty gun at the man.

"I want the police," he said.

"Well," said the big man, "you don't want the whole darned force, do you? I'm the precinct detective. Who are you?"

"Sam Hart. They kidnaped me. Wanted me to do some of their dirty work."

"Kidnaped, huh? I thought Mac was up to something. Where's MacFarlan now?"

"In the kitchen. I killed him. I killed him with this gun, the gun I took from Wienny."

The dick frowned. "You took a gun from Mike Wienstar?" He strode in the front door and Sam followed him. Sam followed him clear into the kitchen where MacFarlan was still laid out on the floor.

"I know it looks bad for me," Sam was saying, as the dick knelt beside MacFarlan. "But I didn't do murder, honest. I've got a good reputation if you'll just check up. I'm just an ordinary sort of a man. I got a wife and a boy."

The dick turned, looked at Sam Hart. "Shut up, will you? This guy isn't dead. You just vaccinated the side of his head with a bullet. Just a scalp wound. Where's Wienny?"

"Down the basement. He's laid out. I knocked him out."

"Huh?" The dick stood up. He looked

Sam up and down. Then he went down the basement steps and looked at Wienny lying on the floor.

"Is he dead?" Sam asked.

"Dead? I wish you'd cut out calling everybody dead," the dick said. "He's just nicely laid out. You didn't hit him with your fist, did you, mister?"

"No. That is, I had a knob off the wringer in my hand. And he couldn't see very well because I squirted ammonia in his eyes with a water pistol. I suppose I shouldn't have taken such an advantage, but then I'm not feeling very well myself."

The dick put a pair of handcuffs on Wienny. He straightened.

"When you're messing with a guy like Wienstar, you take any old advantage you can get, mister. He is one tough baby. What's this dirty work they wanted you to do?"

"They wanted me to take a suitcase to somebody. I think the suitcase has money in it—money they got from kidnaping somebody, I think."

They went back upstairs and the dick manacled MacFarlan. Then Sam took him into the living room and showed him the closet where the suitcase was.

"Funny," the dick said, "but I made MacFarlan open that case for me. Maybe I didn't look deep enough." He opened the case and thrust his hands down into soiled clothes. He pulled out a stack of money, neatly tied with a strip of tape.

He reached back, pulled out more money. Ten-dollar bills, all new and crisp. Stacks upon stacks of ten-dollar bills.

"I ain't much up on this end of it, but I think this money's phony," the dick said. "I got to report to Headquarters. You sit down. Or maybe you'd like to wash your face. It's a terrible mess. Ease up a little. You're shaky."

"I—I know," Sam said.

He went upstairs, found the bathroom, drenched his face with cold water. He looked in the rippled surface of a mirror. Sam decided he looked bad, but not as bad as that mirror pictured him.

He went downstairs, found the precinct dick waiting for the Headquarters men.

It wasn't long before the wail of a siren announced the men from Headquarters.

When they stepped out of the car, the precinct policeman was standing on the porch waiting to meet them. He said to a gray-templed man with bushy white brows: "Just step in and see what this Mr. Hart did with his little water pistol, sir. It'll do your heart good."

The cops filed in and the man with the bushy brows was introduced as Captain Hathaway. He shook hands with Sam, and then went to look at the two crooks and the counterfeit money.

WHEN he came back to Sam, the captain was talking to one of his men. "If we had Riccara Borden, we'd have the whole counterfeit gang in one night's haul, thanks to a school teacher and a— What's your occupation Mr. Hart?"

"I'm a salesman." Sam Hart produced a card which bore his name and that of the Hart Pen Company, together with the company slogan: *Getting Down to Fine Points, the Finest Are Hart Pens.*

Hathaway looked at the card.

"Look here, didn't you people run a contest that a girl named Riccara Borden won?"

Sam nodded.

"Well, can you tell us where Riccara Borden is?"

"She was in the same hotel I'm staying at," Sam said. "She and her father, Dr. Borden. They're the ones that sent me out here to see Attorney Wycoff about the murder."

"What's that about murder?"

"I think," the precinct dick said, "Mr. Hart has maybe had a little too much excitement. Every time he sees anybody lying down, he thinks they're dead or murdered."

"The girl in the hotel. In my room," Sam insisted. "She tried to get in my window and I was afraid she'd fall, so I pulled her in. She didn't have anything on but a shower curtain. She hit her head getting through the window and that knocked her out. I went out to get help. And I met Riccara Borden and her father. Her father was a doctor and he—"

Sam stopped. He looked at Hathaway.

Sam suddenly got a different slant on things. "Somebody tried to pin this girl's murder on me, Captain. She was all slashed up, but I didn't do it. I couldn't have done it."

"This is all haywire, Mr. Hart." Hathaway scowled. "I don't get it. You say there's a corpse in your room? And this Riccara Borden and her father—but Riccara Borden doesn't have a father."

"Riccara Borden was an engraver with a local engraving company. She fell in love with this no good MacFarlan. MacFarlan persuaded her to produce the plates they used to make counterfeit money. She made the plates, all right, but for some reason she must have gotten angry with the mob she was associated with, because she squealed."

"I know she was mad at MacFarlan," Sam put in, "because I heard Wienny and MacFarlan talking about it. MacFarlan had been running around with another woman. Wienny said that Riccara had tried to squeal on the mob. MacFarlan insisted she wouldn't go to the police because she was too scared, but he thought she might have told me something."

"She tried to tip off that handwriting expert who judged your contest," Hathaway said. "I expect MacFarlan was watching her pretty close, so she couldn't figure out any other way."

"She just tore that entry blank for your contest from the pages of a magazine. She wrote her letter on the blank, telling why she liked Hart Pens. But she took a pin or something and worked on those minutely printed contest instructions at the bottom of the page. She pricked some of the letters with a pin."

"A school teacher by the name of Packard or Pickard or something, said she was looking at the winning entry through a magnifying glass and she came across those pin pricks in the printing. She figured that if you joined the pricked letters together, it made sense. This school teacher showed it to us."

"Riccara Borden had used that means of giving out her information. She figured your contest judge, being a handwriting expert in a crime lab, would dope it out, but he didn't. Anyway, in her code message, she

named people and told about places. We got the plates that were used and rounded up Scar Harding and his lady just as they were about to leave town on a train. Scar was the head of the mob."

"Wait." Sam held up his hand. "This Harding fellow have a scar on his chin?"

"Yeah."

"That's the man who said he was Dr. Borden." Sam stood up. "Don't you think you'd better go look at this murdered girl? Why couldn't she be Riccara Borden?"

IN THE hotel, Hathaway took one look at the slashed body of the girl on the bed. "That's her. We've got murder on our hands now."

Sam didn't want to look at the body. He went over to the window through which Riccara Borden and trouble had come hand in hand. It was still dark outside, and most of the electric signs in the street were out. He looked down at the sill. The starling feather that had been trapped there still fluttered in the updraft of east wind.

"The way it looks," Hathaway was saying, "this Riccara Borden took a run-out on the gang when she heard about winning the contest. She still wanted to squeal on them, but she didn't have the nerve and the sense to come to the cops."

"She tried to get in touch with you, Mr. Hart. Before she could, Scar Harding caught up with her. Rather than risk a fuss about getting her out of the hotel, he must have taken a room, locked her up in it, after removing her clothes."

"Riccara tried to get to you through this window, and succeeded. Only before she could talk, somebody came into the room and killed her. Or else you killed her yourself, Mr. Hart, which doesn't make sense after what I've seen of you and heard about you."

"I didn't do it," Sam said earnestly.

"Did you leave the door unlocked?"

Sam shook his head. "I locked the door when I went looking for a doctor. I never got out of sight of the door."

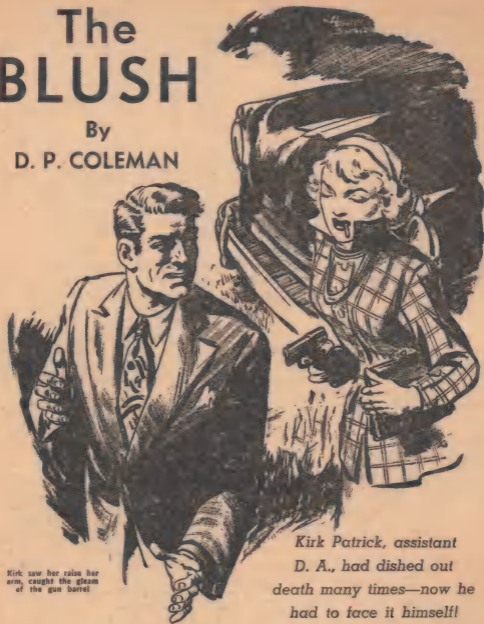
"Then somebody came in through the window."

"No. That couldn't be." Sam shook his

(Continued on page 113)

The BLUSH

By
D. P. COLEMAN



Kirk saw her raise her arm, caught the gleam of the gun barrel

Kirk Patrick, assistant D. A., had dished out death many times—now he had to face it himself!

AT 5:03 P.M., Kirk Patrick jangled down the worn, marble stairs of San Francisco's Hall of Justice. At the corner newsstand, he paused and read the black headlines of the evening paper: NINO MANZETTI DIES TONIGHT.

"Paper, Mr. Patrick?" the newsboy asked.

"Yeah. Thanks Charlie. Keep the change."

As he walked towards the garage, Kirk's eyes drifted hurriedly over the first two paragraphs of the news story. At the third paragraph, they paused and digested every word:

With little more than circumstantial evidence to aid him, Assistant District Attorney Kirk Patrick carried the case to its unexpected climax. The young prosecutor's legal cunning and oratorical eloquence so impressed and swayed the jury that, despite all predictions to the contrary, Manzetti was brought to justice.

Kirk was smiling as he folded the newspaper. At seven minutes after five the world still looked rosy.

"Hi, Mr. Kirk!" the garage attendant called. His round, black face framed a bubble of white teeth.

"Hello, Jefferson," Kirk replied. "How's the wife and kids?"

"Fine, Mr. Kirk. They's all fine."

As Kirk walked to the back of the darkened garage, the clacking of his heels on the concrete floor echoed and re-echoed into the far recesses of the building. He counted Jefferson Davis Brown, his wife, and at least a half dozen of his close relatives as sure votes in any future election.

He climbed into his powder-blue sedan, turned over the motor and pointed its humming nose into the street. At twenty-eight minutes after five, he was clear of the downtown traffic, heading for home and for Helen. That's when it happened.

He felt something hard and blunt shoved against his neck, and heard the command, "Turn left, here!"

KIRK all but jumped out of his hand-tailored gabardine. He snapped his head about suddenly. The car swayed out of control.

"What the hell is this?" he demanded. "Who are you?"

She was young and blond and soft, and somewhat out of character for the part she played.

"Look where you're going!" she cried. "Turn left at the next corner."

Kirk slammed on the brakes and pulled the car to the curb. He turned and stared down the barrel of a gun.

"Get this car moving!" she ordered. With her suede handbag, she shielded the gun from the eyes of passers-by.

Kirk regarded her carefully—the thin black line that ran along the part of her honey-blond hair, her expensive clothes that were extreme, almost gaudy. "What do you

want from me?" he asked angrily. "Money?" He pulled his wallet from his coat pocket and tossed it on her lap. "There's thirty dollars in there. Take it and get out! And put your cap pistol away before it goes off."

"I don't want your money, *Mister Patrick*." Her words were biting and bitter.

"What *do* you want? And how do you know who I am?"

"You ask a lot of questions," she parried.

"I think I have a right to some answers."

"You've no right to anything. Better start driving. I'm not playing games!"

Kirk knew she meant it. There was a fierceness in the set of her trim jaw that told him to use discretion. He turned in the seat and drove the car slowly from the curb. All the while, he probed the files of his memory for the misplaced picture of her face, but to no avail. He had never seen her before. Hers was not the kind of face one would forget easily.

He glanced into the rear-view mirror. She was only a kid. Not twenty, he guessed. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Head south out of town. To your little highway in the mountains. Take the Ridge route."

"You must be writing my biography." He was stunned. It didn't add up. She knew too much about him and he too little about her. What was she after? He found himself immersed in a situation he could not fathom and he made up his mind to wade out as quickly as possible. He had to find a subtle plan. No rash moves—not when he sat only five feet from the dangerous end of that gun.

They were almost out of town before Kirk found his chance. He saw a motorcycle cop hiding behind a parked car, waiting to pounce upon some unsuspecting motorist. The intersection traffic signal changed from green to red. Kirk gave the car the gas and breezed through. In a moment he heard the whine of the siren behind him.

"Pull over!" the cop barked as he drew alongside. He had a fat round face and a figure to match. Kirk did as he was ordered. He turned to his passenger and shrugged.

"You're sly, aren't you?" she said. "Don't think you're getting away from me. Put him wise and he'll get it, too."

Kirk read the hate that blazed from her

eyes. It seared him, then left him cold.

The cop walked back from his motorcycle. He looked Kirk over and said, "What's the matter, Buster, don't you like red? Let's see your driver's license!"

Kirk estimated his chances. Everything hinged on the sharpness and intelligence of this guardian of the law. Kirk looked him over and decided that his chances were slim. He turned to his passenger and said, "May I have my wallet? He wants my driver's license."

She handed it to him with one hand. The other she kept hidden. Kirk knew what was in that hand. He knew she held it ready.

He passed the license out the window and his nerves tensed. The cop was staring at the girl in the back seat. Kirk watched his eyes, then his slow, pleased smile. Kirk relaxed. He knew the copper's inspection was beyond the call of duty.

"What's your occupation, Buster?" the cop asked. He talked as he wrote.

"I'm an attorney," Kirk replied. "Assistant District Attorney of this county."

The policeman looked up at Kirk, then back at the license. "I'm sorry, Mr. Patrick," he said. "I didn't realize it was you."

"No, I guess not."

"I'm sorry, but I'll have to give you this ticket anyway. You can get it fixed. You see, they're numbered. Once we start to fill them . . ."

"Okay, okay," Kirk broke in. "Give me the ticket."

He put the car in gear. The officer took another look at the girl, then he smiled and winked. Kirk drove off in disgust.

SAN FRANCISCO was left in the lowering dusk. They climbed and twisted along the mountain road. Kirk tried to question the girl again, but his only reply was the singing of the tires on the black pavement and the sporadic sputtering of loose gravel. There was only one sensible thing to do—play along.

To the west, the pale wash of blue sky was deepening. The orange sun was no more. At 6:14 P.M. Kirk snapped on the headlights. The twin white wands of light changed the surrounding dusk into darkness.

It was night and Kirk thought of his wife, Helen.

She would be wondering and waiting. There would be a series of phone calls from which she would learn nothing. He wanted to be with her tonight of all nights. She had been so upset about this Manzetti business. It was too bad Helen didn't understand. Her lack of understanding for his position, his aims, his methods was the only unfortunate feature of their pleasant life together.

She was proud of him, he knew, and yet she seemed saddened by the very successes that made her proud. That morning at breakfast she had repeated her fears: "It's not worth it, Kirk. I'd rather be poor and happy. I'm afraid for you. It's not your place to condemn people, no matter what they've done. That should be left to God."

Kirk remembered telling her that her remarks were childish, and that when she became hostess in the governor's mansion in Sacramento she would forget that she had arrived there on the dead bones of the poor criminals her bloodthirsty husband had persecuted. Kirk had gone out after that and had left Helen looking very hurt and very heavy-hearted.

Maybe he could make it up to her. She could fly to Los Angeles for the weekend and visit her relatives and friends. The trip always seemed to do her a world of good. He could find so little time to give her . . .

"Step on it! We're behind schedule."

The words came from the back seat. They shook Kirk from his reverie. He pressed hard on the gas pedal and sent the car bugging along the deserted highway that coiled around and over the tree-covered mountains. They dipped into and left a small town behind them, its lights a little smudge of yellow on the black sky.

They left the main highway now and began the steep, winding climb to Kirk's mountain-top cabin. The graveled road glistened here and there in the white moonlight and then lost itself again in deep shadow.

Kirk loved this mountain, its ruggedness, its green girdle of trees, its commanding view, its aloofness, high above all else. He and Helen had come here often to lose themselves for a little while to the rabble and rush

of the every-day world. Now, for the first time, he felt the loneliness of the place.

When they reached the top, Kirk stopped the car before the cabin, shut off the motor, turned and said, "Here we are. What now?"

"Get out," the girl ordered. "Stand away from the car!"

Kirk obeyed. He stood quietly in the moonlight, a perfect target. He watched her leave the car. Her eyes never left him for a moment.

"Open the door." She motioned towards the cabin.

"Sorry. No keys. You should have inquired before we—"

"Don't lie! Open that door."

Kirk saw her raise her arm, caught the gleam of the gun barrel. "All right," he said. "Put that thing away. I'll open it."

WATCHING closely, she ushered him at gunpoint through the door and into the oversized living room. Kirk watched her sweep the room with expressionless eyes. She took in the stone fireplace, the built-in bar, the beamed ceiling, the furniture.

"You do all right for yourself, don't you?" she said finally.

"Pretty well," Kirk replied.

"How many did you have to grind under to get this?"

"I don't think I understand," Kirk answered.

"You understand all right!" she assured him. Then she indicated one of two sofas that straddled either side of the fireplace, placed herself carefully on the other.

As Kirk seated himself, he said, "This is very cozy. You really didn't have to go to all this trouble to get me alone. My wife is very broad-minded."

"Have your little joke." Her voice came heavy and she spoke as though she feared her own words. "You'll be dead in half an hour."

The thought hit home and Kirk's face lost its color. "You're out of your mind!" He bolted to his feet. "Why? What have you against me?"

"Sit down," she snapped, "or you'll get it now!"

Kirk collapsed back on the sofa, open-mouthed.

"Nino dies at eight," she continued. "So do you. You killed him with your dirty lies and filthy courtroom tricks, and I'm evening the score!"

Kirk could feel his legs tremble. He tried to steady himself, to arrange his thoughts. It was difficult . . . Manzetti — Nino Manzetti. The pieces of the puzzle began to find their places. At least, now, he knew *why*, though the knowledge was something more than shocking.

"Who are you?" Kirk asked. "What is Manzetti to you?"

"I'm not on the witness stand," she replied.

"I suppose it doesn't really matter. I can guess."

"You're not in a position to be cute," she reminded him.

Shaken, Kirk studied his would-be assassin. Everything was all wrong. As he pondered his situation and groped for a way out, the soft chimes of the mantle clock tolled the half hour. His eyes darted in its direction. 7:30. Then back to her. He considered for a moment lunging across for the gun, but quickly discarded the idea. Foolish heroics were not the answer. No, he'd get himself out safe and sound. Talk was his weapon. He'd use it. Talk his way out. He still had time.

"Do you think you have the courage to pull that trigger?" Kirk asked.

"I'll pull it."

"I don't think so. If you intended to kill me you wouldn't have waited until now. This is just school-girl theatrics."

"I'll shoot," she insisted.

"Then why wait?" Kirk asked. The bluff was part of his stock in trade. He hoped she did not see the tiny, glistening beads that dotted his forehead.

"Nino dies at eight," she explained. "After that, you're a murderer. Then I'll have a right to kill you."

"A right?" Kirk shouted. "Is that how you'll save your conscience?"

"My conscience won't bother me," she said grimly.

"It's not your conscience you need worry about," Kirk assured her. "You may think your little scheme of doing away with me here in my own house is a masterpiece of

planning. Well, it isn't. That two-bit cop that pinched me took a long, friendly look at you. He could give all your vital measurements right now. You haven't a chance of putting this over. They'll get you and you'll follow Manzetti to the gas chamber."

"You're smart, aren't you?"

"You have to be smart to survive," Kirk replied.

"Well, you're not smart enough. If you were, you'd realize that I don't really care if the cops get me. Without Nino, I—"

Her voice choked off. She clamped her jaws tightly together.

KIRK read the pathos, the hurt, the loss in her youthful face. He knew he was up against a bitter enemy. How could he fight her? He glanced at the clock. Twenty-three minutes to eight. Think of something, he told himself. Think of something, fast!

"May I smoke?" he asked. She didn't reply. "Cigarette?" She shook her head in the negative. "May I stand?" Before she could refuse, Kirk reminded her, "They're even allowing Manzetti a few last requests."

"Don't try any tricks!" she warned.

Kirk rose slowly. He walked behind the sofa, then stood before the floor-length windows looking out. At his feet, green trees cascaded into the moonlit canyon below. He could smell the soft scent of the pines and the redwoods. He felt as though he had never appreciated this view before. Now, there was so little time.

He walked back behind the sofa, and stood leaning on it with his hands. It felt familiar, that position. He had stood that way before countless juries—informing, pleading, instructing, never at a loss for words. Now he stood, groping, uncertain of his ground. This was his most important case and he was losing.

"Why," he asked, "are you throwing away your life, keeping faith with a bum like Manzetti?"

She protested, angrily. "Nino was kind and good."

"He probably beat his mother," Kirk retorted. "I deal with his type every day. He fooled a lot of people. He was smooth. Smooth-talking and smooth-looking. You're

just a kid, blinded by what you think is love. Manzetti is a criminal of the lowest order."

"Don't call him a criminal!" she cried.

"Why not?" Kirk asked. "He's done time on three separate occasions." Kirk waved a hand in her direction to forestall any protest she might offer. "I know, I know—he's never been up on a serious charge, but that doesn't mean his skirts are clean. Manzetti is just like every other habitual criminal—their lives are pocked and ulcerated by crime. Sooner or later it dies out under them. Either at the hands of another gunman or at the hands of the law. We've been watching Manzetti for years. This time we really hung it on him."

"If someone makes a mistake, you never let him forget it, do you?" She all but spat out the words at him. "You and the cops are all the same. You don't know what it means to be poor and pushed around. Maybe you wouldn't be so perfect, if you did."

"Don't sing me that poverty song," Kirk said. "Come in to the courtroom any day and hear the defense attorneys play that tune for the juries . . . 'He was poor and hungry . . . kicked about . . . society never gave him a chance . . . I know that routine by heart!'"

He raised his voice to drive home his point. "Poverty is no excuse. It's a reason but not an excuse. Manzetti is anything but poor now. He's grown rich at the expense of too many innocent people. He's getting what he deserves. I helped put him in the gas chamber and I'm proud of it!" Kirk was pressing her to the limit. He had to move carefully. He continued, "Manzetti is paying tonight for all his crimes."

"What did you try him for?" she snapped. "Killing the guard, or all the other crimes you think he committed?"

That stung Kirk a bit. He prided himself on being a just man. He found himself having more respect for his adversary.

"Manzetti was tried and convicted of killing the jewelry store guard," he said. "It was a fair trial. He got what he deserved."

"Nino is innocent!" She made the statement flatly.

Kirk knew she believed every word she said. He heard the chimes again, soft and menacing. Fifteen minutes left.

"How can you make a statement like that." He paced as he talked. He was the D.A. again, sweeping gestures and all. "Twelve men and women from all walks of life, people who had never known or even seen Manzetti, heard the facts, reviewed them, deliberated upon them, and found him guilty."

"You talked them into it!" she accused.

"Do you believe that any group of people could be talked into condemning another human being to death, if they didn't believe that person guilty of an unforgivable crime?"

"You made them believe it!" Hate was in her voice. "You twisted everything. You made everything sound bad. You made them believe it!"

QUICKLY Kirk checked the clock. Twelve minutes. He wet his parched lips. His throat felt dry.

"At two o'clock in the morning, on February sixth, Nino Manzetti climbed, or jumped, onto the roof of the Schaeffer Jewelry Store." Kirk bit off each word quickly as he explained. "He lowered himself through the air vent into the building—a feat that could be accomplished only by a man of slight stature. A very neat trick, in that it did not set off the burglar alarm. Once inside, Manzetti knocked out the guard. He cleaned out a number of jewelry cases and was ready to leave when the guard surprised him. Manzetti hadn't hit him hard enough.

"The guard fired. So did Manzetti. The guard was killed. Manzetti had to get out fast. He broke the door window, setting off the burglar alarm, and ran into the street. The racket aroused the neighborhood. Four different people saw the fleeing figure. Each of these witnesses identified Manzetti as the fugitive."

He stopped talking as he watched her get up off the sofa. She stood, gun in hand, facing him, as she said. "Those people didn't see Nino. It was two in the morning and black as pitch. They couldn't see who it was. You put the words in their mouths!"

Kirk felt a drop of sweat trickle down the side of his face. As she talked his eyes darted back and forth between her and the clock. Now he stared down the barrel of the gun.

"Don't be a fool," he grated. "I didn't talk anyone into anything. Those people are

adults, with adult minds. They knew what they were saying. I only sought truth and justice."

"Truth and justice," she repeated scornfully. "You don't know the meaning of the words! Nino was just another conviction to you."

"No, no, you're mistaken." Kirk's eyes were wide and staring.

"I'm not mistaken," she persisted. "I know all about you. About your wife. Where you came from. Where you think you're going. You want success. You want Mr. Patrick on top of the pack. You don't care who goes down under foot. Nino was one of the poor unfortunates who drifted onto Mr. Patrick's path of fame. Well, you've just about reached the end of that road!"

Kirk felt his legs shaking. He estimated the distance between them. Twelve feet. Too far. He'd only take one step when her finger would tighten about the trigger. The bullet would smash into his chest and Kirk Patrick, future governor of California, would be a disorderly bundle of flesh on the floor.

"Wait," he pleaded. "Listen to me. You said you know all about me, about my wife. Think of her!"

"I'm sorry for her," she said.

"You don't understand." Kirk's words were high-pitched. "I was only doing my duty. You can't kill a man for doing his job. I'm the district attorney. They pay me to prosecute the accused."

"You should make sure they're guilty before you prosecute them," she sneered.

"He's guilty!" Kirk shouted. He pounded the back of the sofa with his fist. "Nino Manzetti is guilty!"

"Stop it!" she cried.

"How can you stand there," Kirk asked, "alone, against the world, and proclaim his innocence? You're a foolish girl, blinded by an infatuation. While Manzetti was killing that guard, you were probably in bed, asleep, dreaming of your tainted prince charming. How can you defend him?"

She waited a breathless second before answering, then she whispered softly, almost reverently, "He was with me." With her words, her eyes dropped from his for a moment and her pale cheeks slowly filled with color. Just a tinge of pink at first, then

it deepened and mellowed like fine, red wine.

A FLOOD of thoughts poured into Kirk's confused brain. He tried vainly to dispel them. They pictured for him a bygone courtroom scene: Assistant District Attorney Kirk Patrick stood before a young woman on the witness stand. He asked her a question, the answer to which would have a great influence on the verdict. She answered and blushed unashamedly. He pointed a finger at her and said, "Behold the blush! So simple. A spoken word, a truth revealed, calls it forth. All the world's wealth could not buy it, nor the brilliant minds of science create it. Yet, in the face of the innocent, it is as unstoppable as time. It is a statement, an affirmation from the Almighty! Behold the blush! No more need be said."

He had won the case on those words. The papers had quoted him. After that, his courtroom was always filled. Now, his words came rocking back at him, frightening him with the possibilities they suggested.

Kirk shook himself from the past. "Why didn't you come to court to testify on Manzetti's behalf?" he demanded.

"I tried," she replied. "I wanted to. Nino wouldn't let me."

"When his life was at stake? Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I went to him before the trial," she explained. "He was sure he would be acquitted. He told me you would only tear my story to pieces, make me look foolish. That you'd bring everything between us out into the open. No one would believe me then. He said I couldn't do him any good and I'd only ruin myself."

Kirk stood staring at her for some time, refusing to believe what he had seen and heard. He forced his eyes from her to the clock. Nine minutes, it said, nine precious, pulsating minutes. And at last he felt he had the answer. He walked to the window, then turned and said, "How long have you known Manzetti?"

"None of your business," she answered.

Kirk ignored her remark and prodded further. "Six months? A year? It couldn't be very long."

"You won't ask many more questions," she replied.

"You didn't know Manzetti had served time, did you?" He watched her face, each minute reaction to his words. Venom and hate for him exuded from her every pore. But she was listening.

"I don't care what Nino has done!"

"Then you didn't know," Kirk retorted.

"I said I didn't care! No one could believe you anyway."

"His convictions are on record," Kirk assured her. "Didn't he bother to tell you?"

"Shut up!" she commanded.

"I don't think Manzetti told you very much," he went on. "If you're going to kill for him, there are a few things you should know."

"Shut up, I said!" Her eyes were blazing.

Kirk's heart beat heavily against his chest. Time had almost run out. He fought panic and pushed down the plea for mercy that kept surging its way to his lips. To beg for mercy was foolish, he knew. She was hypnotized by the drama she had created. No plea that he could make would stop her. He had to fight to the end.

He strained to control his voice, to belie his true feelings. His final punch had to be delivered with finesse, with convincing composure. He would have only one chance.

"During the case, I delved pretty deeply into Manzetti's life, both public and private," Kirk said. "Quite a few women have knelt at his shrine, but I don't remember coming across anyone that fits your description."

"No one knew about Nino and me. Not even my family . . ." The last seemed to slip out. "We were smart." She held her head up haughtily. "Discreet, Nino called it."

"Manzetti was smart," Kirk replied.

"What do you mean by that?"

Kirk had her on the hook. He began pulling in the line. "He was smart enough to be discreet. Not because your family or your friends might find out about you two, but because you have to be careful when you already have a wife."

"You liar!" she screamed. "You dirty liar!" She tightened her grip on the trigger. "I'll stop your lies forever!"

Kirk felt as though he was looking into eternity. "Why should I lie? I'll be dead in six minutes . . . Why do you think Man-

zetti went to Los Angeles every two weeks?"

"His fence was in L.A."

"He got rid of hot jewelry down there, all right," Kirk agreed. "And he saw his wife."

"You're lying!" she repeated hoarsely, but she was trying to convince herself as well as Kirk.

"The case records are in my briefcase in my car," he said. "After you kill me, go and read it for yourself. You're keeping faith with a man who must have laughed at your being so naive. Discreet was the word he used, wasn't it?"

"Stop it, stop it!" she sobbed.

She crumpled into a weeping mass on the sofa. The gun clattered to the floor. Kirk weaved to it unsteadily and placed it in his pocket. He walked across the room, took a bottle from the shelf and poured himself a long drink. As he raised the glass to his parched lips, the mantle clock softly tolled the hour.

THE RIDE back was a ride of silence. Only the car had a little, mournful song to sing. Its headlights filled the highway with eerie yellow light and flaked the roadside trees.

She sat staring into the nothingness, her head turned away from Kirk. He started to speak to her a number of times, but never quite found the words. Over and over again, the night's events tumbled in review before his troubled mind.

Back in the city, they slowed, then stopped for a red light.

Kirk sat toward the girl and asked, "Where may I take you?"

She shook herself from her trance and looked about. "I'll get out here."

"No, wait! I'll drive you home." In vain, Kirk put out a hand to stop her. "I'd like to be of some help, if I may."

She stood in the street and faced him. She looked very tired.

"I'll be all right," she said.

Through the open door, Kirk watched her

blend into the shadows. Behind him, a horn was blasting. The light had changed to green. Kirk put the car in gear and drove slowly away.

When he stopped before his house, soft light outlined a half-dozen windows. Helen was still waiting. She met him at the door, white-faced and red-eyed.

"Oh, Kirk! I've been so worried! You're all right?"

"I'm all right, Helen." His words were as hollow as his eyes.

He walked wearily into the living room. There, over a chair arm, lay a newspaper. Its headlines blared something about Manzetti and something about an execution. Kirk felt empty and sick inside. He poured himself a heavy drink from a liquor cabinet. He talked as he poured.

"One of Manzetti's girl friends tried to kill me tonight. She said he was innocent."

Helen's voice pulsed with emotion. "Was he?"

Kirk stood with his back to Helen. He emptied the glass before he answered. "She was lying." His hand shook violently as he poured another.

"How . . . how did you get away?"

"I crushed her with words. I'm the district attorney, remember?" Kirk's tone was caustic. He turned and faced his wife. "She was a fool. She loved Manzetti. She thought he loved her. . . . I told her he had a wife in L.A."

"Did he?"

"No, not a wife. But you can bet he had another woman down there. He seemed to have that fatal charm." Kirk smiled jestingly. "He might even have been meeting you, Helen. You run down to L.A. quite frequently . . ."

The smile wasted away on Kirk's lips and the glass dropped from his grasp. For with his words, Helen's pale cheeks slowly filled with color. Just a tinge of pink at first, then it deepened and mellowed like fine, red wine. . . .

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Tony's gun was pressed
against Stringer's ribs

CHAPTER I

FORCIBLE FEEDING



JIM STRINGER sat in the D. A.'s office, telling the big man that everything was about set, that he was pretty sure the department could go ahead and crack down on Vanny Banco's famous El Fuente Club.

"I just need one more night—tonight," Stringer said grimly. "That layout isn't what it's cracked up to be. I've got about all I want to go on. I've been getting plenty of information about that swell joint

from a friend who runs a place a couple of blocks away from it."

"You've got to be a hundred percent right, Jimmy," the D. A. said. "Banco has a lot of friends on the city pay roll, and he calls a lot of people in the gravy-train section by their first names. It's the playground for the smart set and you have got to be dead right."

"I figure I am," Stringer said, and ran his long fingers through a thick mop of black hair. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.



MURDER MEMOS

It was a near-perfect frame the killers pinned on Detective Jim Stringer when they placed him in the shadow of guilt—but everything changed when he began to picture the crime in a different light!

A Novelet by JOE ARCHIBALD

"You look pretty fagged, Jimmy," the D. A. said. "Better get yourself some sleep tonight. Banco will keep."

"Maybe," Stringer said. "I've got other ideas about that baby. I figure he's too rotten now to keep long. Yeah, I could sleep for forty-eight hours. But I'm getting Banco first. I heard a story about Banco and a girl—and the girl was a friend of a pal of mine."

His fingers toyed with a grim-looking object that was attached to his watch chain. It

was a bullet. It had been taken out of the corpse of an erstwhile public enemy named Georgie Chipman. Stringer had battled it out with Chipman on a platform of the Broadway-Seventh Avenue subway. The newspapers had got some nice pictures.

STRINGER was a big man, who had not always been a hero. There had been a time when Stringer could take his liquor but could never leave it alone. Once he had been kicked off the Force and a girl had gone

to bat for him and had given him his second chance.

Jim Stringer had taken nothing stronger than beer from the day he had thanked that girl. She was a cop's daughter and her name was Mary Leonard. Mary had told Jim Stringer that he reminded her of Errol Flynn and she wished he would grow a mustache to make the likeness even more striking. Jim Stringer would have jumped off the tallest building in the city if Mary Leonard wanted him to.

"You have got to be mighty sure," the D. A said again.

"Okay," Stringer said, and caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He would have to trim the mustache a little, for it was getting out of hand.

He turned his head away from the wall when the door of the D.A.'s office opened, and he recognized a man the newspapers had been referring to of late as the successor to the heavy-set man at the big mahogany desk.

Russell Draper had won a lot of big cases and seemed destined to go a long way in the state. He was a wiry, nervous man just inside his fortieth year. He was the assistant D.A.

"Hello, Draper," the D.A. said, and nodded. "Like Stringer here, you're overdoing it. You need a rest. You didn't seem to be yourself when you tried to get that conviction against Harry Mitchell."

"Maybe you're right, Sam," Draper said.

He was a meticulous man, smartly dressed, and no matter where you saw him he always wore a flower in his buttonhole. Most of the time it was a gardenia.

"You're going to get a crack at Vanny Banco," Stringer said as Draper clipped the end off a cigar. "I think I've got that phony dead to rights. I'll know tonight."

"I think you're crazy, Stringer!" Draper said. "You better slow down laddie. You can't take the role of crusader against a man of his reputation without some facts to go on. The papers haven't mentioned anything irregular about El Fuente Club. . . . Are you backing up such a crazy play, Sam? In six months there's an election—"

"I've got a vice squad, Draper," the D.A. said. "If Stringer proves there's gambling

going on in Banco's place, we've got to clean the place out. You know I've always hated gamblers, Draper. Sure-thing gamblers. You know what I mean."

"I see," Draper said. "And if Stringer and his men raid the place and find nothing, where will you end up? Banco has as many friends as you have. In the right places." He glanced at Stringer. "You've been tipped off, Jim.

"You can put it that way, Mr. Draper," Stringer said. "I've got a way of making sure tonight." He fiddled with his grim watch charm, grinned at the D.A. "Banco came to town ten years ago. He was a headwaiter at the El Myerto. Look at him now. Maybe there's a lot of the right kind of people who are pals of his because they have to be."

Draper took some papers out of his pocket. Stringer, not wanting to interfere with the D.A.'s office, got up and told them they would hear from him in a few hours.

"Take it easy, Jim."

Stringer killed most of the afternoon by going to a movie. He fell asleep when the second feature came on. An usher politely nudged him and he jerked his head up quickly.

"Sorry," he said, and got up and left the theatre.

The sun had gone down behind the high buildings. Jim Stringer looked at his watch and saw that he was due at the tavern uptown in just fifteen minutes. He took a cab.

THE PLAZA Tavern and Grill was doing a brisk business when Stringer walked in. He filled a vacancy at the bar and drank two glasses of beer. The bartender came over and wiped up the slops in front of Stringer.

"In the back room," he said under his breath. "You'll find Tony there."

Tony used to work for Vanny Banco. Tony had been fired because he had made a pass or two at the hatcheck girl at El Fuente and Banco had liked the little blonde himself. Tony had been talking a lot. For five bucks, Tony would talk all night. Stringer went into the back room.

"Hi, Stringer," Tony said.

He got up and locked the door that the detective had closed behind him. For some reason he could not fathom, Jim Stringer did not feel just right.

There was something in the air, and his mouth was dry.

"I've got the century note," Stringer said. "I want the rest of it tonight—the layout of that joint of Banco's."

"You'll get it," Tony said.

ANOTHER door opened and four men came in.

Jim Stringer reached for his Police Positive, the one that had finished George Chipman, but there was no play. Tony had a gun pressed against his ribs.

"I don't get it," Stringer said. "A double cross, Tony?"

"Maybe. Somebody paid me more dough, so I shifted, copper. I work for the guy who has the biggest bankroll."

The four hard-looking men grinned at Jim Stringer. A powerfully built tough said it was time to get down to business. A lot of work had to be done.

"Get a bottle of whiskey, Tony," the obvious leader and brains of the quartette clipped. "You cover this bull, Mack. Used to be sort of a stew bum, didn't he? Time he fell off the wagon."

Stringer had been expecting it quick. It occurred to him that he was going to live for a while longer and he tried to find a reason for it all. There was a tingling in his long legs. He felt tired and half gone. The beer, that was it. They were all in on it, had been playing him for a sucker. Just enough in one of the beers to take the fight out of him.

"Get his gun, one of you guys!"

Tony came in with a quart of whiskey and handed it to the big man.

"I been around, copper." The man grinned and peeled the cap off the bottle. "In the South Seas—I been there too—they call it the water cure. I call it the whisky cure. Hand me the tube and the funnel, Corky. The rest of you get him down and you, Mack, put your knee on his chest. Tony, you grip his nose so he can't breathe through

it. Imagine, forcing a guy to get plastered. With me, it's a pleasure!"

Stringer, realizing what was impending, put up a fight, but there was not much strength left in him. The man named Mack got his knee on his chest and the others held him down.

The powerful brute finally got the tube between his teeth and Stringer started to choke.

"Okay, Tony. Shut off his nose."

Stringer couldn't breathe without taking whiskey into his throat. The fiery stuff burned him through and through and the big brute straddling him had to let up every once in a while while Stringer retched and coughed the whisky out of his windpipe.

The terrible ordeal took the rest of the vitality out of him and the last pint of whisky ran down into his stomach and had its desired effect. He was barely conscious of the tube being taken out of his mouth, feeling Tony's fingers leave his nose. Voices came from a distance.

"Only way you can make a man drink," the husky voice droned. "Got to find it inside of him or he'll have an alibi. Gimme that gun, Tony."

Stringer's head was spinning and the voices became jumbled. He thought they said something about dragging a guy out of there and throwing him in an alley. He wondered who they were talking about as he blacked out.

CHAPTER II

PROMISE TO PAY



BANCO entered his office at three in the morning. The last of his customers had left the place. There was a trace of lipstick on Vanny Banco's ear and some powder on his sleeve.

Vanny went to a little cabinet and got himself a bottle, then he dropped in a big leather chair and wondered where all the hardships of life were. He was doing all right by himself.

A man came into Vanny's luxurious office and announced that Tony and a couple of

friends were outside.

"Sure, send 'em in," Vanny said, and sipped his liqueur. "I've been expecting them."

Tony came in first. "Everything is okay, Mr. Banco," he said. "You don't have to worry no more about moving."

"Nice work, Tony. You can come back to work. Where's the others?"

"At your service, pal," a big tough said, and stepped inside.

Tony got out of his way so he could get a clear shot at Vanny Bance.

"Look Butch," Banco cried. "What's—"

The big tough got two shots at Vanny and the bullets splattered through Banco's stiff shirt bosom and sent him crashing over backward.

"Okay, Tony," said the big tough. "The combo of that wall safe of his is in his pocket. Get it quick!"

"Let's get out of here, Butch. Them shots—"

"Shut up! We're playing with time. I'll finish you off if you waste another second. This means five grand to us. How long do you think that copper will wait?"

"Yeah. I'll get it."

Tony found the combination of the safe in Vanny Banco's wallet.

"A sucker he didn't memorize it." The big crook grinned. "Then we'd had to have cracked that box."

He took something out of his pocket and dropped it on the floor. A few moments later they were out of there and spreading out to various parts of town. The big man drove to a deserted parking lot at the edge of town, and he found Jim Stringer there. The detective was mumbling, trying to get up on his feet.

"Figured that stuff about right, copper," the tough snapped.

He gave Stringer back his gun and fumbled through the detective's pockets.

"That about fixes your wagon, Stringer," the man said and hurried away.

IT WAS nearly morning when Stringer stumbled to his room on the West Side. His head was splitting wide open and the reek of whiskey kept turning his stomach

over and over. His thoughts were jumbled and he could not separate them. He passed somebody in the hall as he entered the rooming house but the figure was blurred.

Whoever it was said something to him and he just grunted and pulled himself up a flight of stairs. He wanted to get into his bed and sleep forever, but a sixth sense warned him against it. He had to get on his feet and get himself to thinking.

Stringer made himself a pot of black coffee and drank two cups of the bitter brew. He got aromatic spirits of ammonia and downed that, then stripped off his clothes and took a cold shower.

His brain began to function and took him back over the events of the last few hours. He remembered a lot of things.

"Got me plastered," Stringer said to himself. "Maybe put some knockout drops in it too. How long was I out?"

He looked out the window and saw the pink streaks across the eastern sky line. He had entered the backroom of the tavern about seven o'clock.

Quickly he crossed the room and lifted his coat from the pile of clothing he had discarded. The gun was there in its holster and he drew it out and examined it. Two shots had been fired from it.

Stringer reeled a little, caught at a post of his bed and held on. The picture was getting clear in his mind, an ugly picture of which he was a part. Jim Stringer, off the wagon again, had run amok and had killed somebody. Whoever that had been downstairs when he had come in had seen him, must have smelled the whisky on him. The stuff had been seeping through his pores.

Somebody knocked on Stringer's door.

"Come in," he said thickly. "The door's unlocked."

He pulled on a dressing gown and straightened his hair, not knowing what to expect.

He gave a sigh of relief when a short, broad-shouldered man came in quickly and shut the door behind him. It was Lew Garvey from Headquarters, a man he had worked with for three years.

Garvey stood there, his back against the door, staring at Stringer, slowly shaking his

head from side to side. He was scared.

"Look, what got into you, Jim?" Garvey said. "What sent you back to the bottle?"

"You think that?" Stringer smiled wearily. "Sure, I got loaded, but they poured it into me."

Garvey snatcher up the gun and examined it closely. Then he dropped it as if it had become a red-hot poker.

"Two shots fired, Jim. They found Banco half an hour ago with two bullets in him. You can ditch the gun, and so what? They'll take the slugs out of Banco and match them up with the one you carry on your chain. You crazy fool!"

"I never went to Banco's joint last night." Jim Stringer said. "Listen to me, Lew. I was knocked out by whiskey forced down my throat."

"They've got you cold, Jim. They found an I.O.U. on the floor in Banco's office. Your signature on it. I know your writing. You got into that club and started trying to beat Banco, and you got in deep and had to write out—Where's the rest of 'em, Jim?"

"You're crazy!" Jim Stringer said, and he only stared when Garvey started rifling his clothes.

Garvey took three crumpled envelopes from one of Stringer's coat pockets and ripped them open. In one of them he found five other little sheets of paper with Jim Stringer's promise to pay scribbled on them. He looked at Stringer, his face sour.

"I'm a cop, Jim," Garvey said. "I've got to take you in."

"Wait, Lew," Jim Stringer begged. "Sit down and let me talk. I'll give it to you straight. From the beginning."

"Go ahead," Lew Garvey said. "If I can see a break, I'll give it to you for Mary Leonard's sake."

HE LISTENED to Stringer's story from the time his friend had entered the tavern until he had staggered back to his rooms. The hardness began to drop away from his mouth and his eyes began to get wider and wider.

"That's on the level, Lew," Stringer said. "I've been a sucker, all the way. They gave me a lot of rope, then kicked the box out

from under me. Banco—"

"But Banco's dead," Lew said. "They figure downtown that you killed him. You're on a spot, fellow. Seems I saw that guy you call Butch somewhere before. They figured to get Banco and put the rap on you. After Banco maybe had paid them to knock you off the Force for keeps. Look, Jim, there's a brain behind this thing. It didn't belong to the mugs that manhandled you. Why did they want Banco? Nobody would kill Vanny unless a bigger guy than Vanny was behind them."

"Yeah," Stringer said. "I guess you've got to take me in, Lew."

"Got any ideas, Jim? Maybe I could go back and tell them you'd cleared out. To give you a day or two."

"That I.O.U." Stringer said, "the one they found in Banco's office—Let me see the ones you've got, Lew."

Garvey handed them over.

"You can plead self-defense, Jim, if everything else fails," he said. "You moved in on Vanny and he pulled a gun. No matter if you owed him dough—"

"I never owed him a dime," Stringer snapped. "You got to believe—" He looked at the I.O.U., then at Lew Garvey. He got up and poured himself another cup of black coffee and waited for its effect.

"I've got to have a day or so before I walk in and give myself up," Stringer said. "I've got me an idea, Lew. But you've got to help."

"Anything," Lew said. "I'll talk to Mary and get her ready for the blowoff. What are you going to do, Jim? I let you get away and they'll nab you before noon."

"Yeah. How about the newspapers? They got anything?"

"Not yet. The D.A. is waiting to talk to you. As far as the public knows, Banco was killed by a person or persons unknown."

"All right," Jim Stringer said. "I'll call the D.A. Look up his home phone number, Lew, while I get shaved and cleaned up. He'll take my word."

Garvey got the D.A. on the phone and Stringer went out into the hall and spoke to the boss.

"Yes, this is Jim," Stringer said. "Sure

the evidence is all against me! I want twenty-four hours before you give it out to the papers. At the end of that time I walk into your office and give myself up."

"This is pretty irregular, Jim," the D.A. answered. "But for the sake of the department—"

Stringer went back into his small apartment, started shaving. He spoke hurriedly to Garvey.

"Looking at that forged I.O.U. makes me think back, Lew. Nice job that baby does, and I know of one guy who specializes in that stuff. He's smart, too. He had to be smart to beat that rap Draper tried to hang on him. I'd swear it was my writing. In lead pencil, though, and that makes it tough. All the microspectographs in the lab wouldn't break it down. That baby is the best in the business."

"Harry Mitchell?" Garvey asked.

"Yeah. Maybe Vanny Banco paid Mitchell a retainer fee. The bigshots who drank Vanny's stuff forgot how many I.O.U.s they maybe signed. That's why Vanny mixed with the best. You get what I mean, Lew?"

"Beginning to. But how does that help?"

"Well, Vanny Banco didn't get where he was without brains—in the entertainment business, I mean. He'd most likely tear sheets off the memo pads in his office to give Harry to work on. To make things look on the level just in case a customer kicked. So we've got to go over to Banco's place and get all that look as if they've been used."

"Not bad, fellow," Garvey said. "But it'll take nerve to go through the cops that are covering the place. You know 'em all. They know you."

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS TO FREEDOM, OR—



THEY went over to Banco's office. Just outside the door of the late night-club impresario's office, two big plain-clothes men nodded briefly to Jim Stringer. Jim knew they could plainly see the results of his enforced hang-over, knew the stale smell of whisky was still on his breath, would be there for another day or two. It takes a long time for a stomach to shed the fumes of nearly a quart of strong liquor.

"Hello, boys," Jim Stringer said. "Yeah, it was quite a night."

"The newspaper boys are smelling a rat," a detective named Riley said. "Can't keep 'em at bay long. Tough luck, Jim."

Stringer went into Banco's office.

"I'd better handle things, Jim," Lew Garvey said.

He looked in the drawers of Banco's desk, found a half-used memo pad. There was another on top of Banco's desk. He slipped them into his pocket.

"A crazy case, all right," Stringer said, as he felt the tension around him.

They had his gun, the one that had pumped two slugs into Banco. They had heard about the I.O.U. The police couldn't think of the right things to say to Jim Stringer, so they kept their mouths closed.

"I've got twenty-four hours, guys," Stringer said as he passed through the door. "Wish me luck."

"We'll do that, Jim."

He and Garvey went to the D.A.'s office, and there the atmosphere was even more strained. The D.A. looked at Stringer's bloodshot eyes and the way his hands shook as he rested them on the arms of the chair.

Garvey turned Stringer's gun and the rest of the I.O.U.s over to the boss.

"We got these in Banco's, Chief," he said, taking some memo pads out of his pocket. "Let's see if they match."

The D.A. ripped a sheet off a pad, then picked up one of the sheets bearing the hastily scrawled writing: "I.O.U. fifty dol-



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lars. J. S. Stringer." He held them both up to the window.

"Different size," he said, and Stringer came over and looked. "Banco's pads are a pale-lemon color and this one with Jim's signature on it is dead-white. What is on your mind, Garvey?"

"We figure when a guy wanted to put a debt on the cuff in Banco's place, he'd go in Banco's office and with a pad handy, wouldn't Vanny have torn sheets off them for his customers?" suggested Lew Garvey.

"Sounds logical," the D.A. said. "Now sit down and give me all of it, Stringer."

Stringer did. The D.A. began to look at his ace detective with less severity.

"Forgery?" he said. "It could be, Jim. Yeah, we found that El Fuente was a gambling joint equipped to the limit. Banco was afraid you were going to kick his business out from under him and he got to you. . . . Stringer, I believe you're on the level."

"Thanks, Chief," Jim Stringer grinned. "Thanks for the twenty-four hours. After that—"

"We've got to let it out to the newspaper men before long. They're out there waiting."

"We couldn't pick up any of those toughs without a reason, could we?" Stringer grated. "All the time I know where to put my hands on this Tony, too. And this Harry Mitchell—"

"Pretty clever guy," the D.A. said. "Ask Draper. If Mitchell did work for Banco he won't leave evidence around. If it will help you any, he hangs out at the Delmore Hotel."

DRAPER came in, but fell back a step when he saw Jim Stringer. His smile was a little forced when he said, "Hello, Jim." He went over to the D.A.'s desk and looked at exhibits A and B.

"Enough to hang me, Mr. Draper," Stringer said. "It'll be your job. You don't miss many. Maybe I'll get the lawyer that saved Mitchell from ten to fifteen."

Draper smiled. "Sometimes a man's job isn't all roses," he said to the detective. "I'll have to admit you were right about Banco's place. Plenty of equipment there."

He touched the flame of a lighter to his

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cigar and an oppressive silence fell over the heads of those in the room.

"Better be going, Jim," Garvey said. "You've got twenty hours left."

Stringer did not seem to hear Garvey. The detective had to speak to him again. Then Stringer snapped out of his brown study and nodded.

"Sure, Lew. Time marches on."

Twenty minutes later, when the two men were approaching the Delmore, Garvey clutches at Stringer's arm.

"That guy over at the newsstand there," he said. "Harry Mitchell."

They saw the man pick up three newspapers, then toss them aside again. When he turned away and walked hurriedly to the Delmore, Stringer and Garvey went to the stand, and both caught the expression on the face of the old lady who was rearranging the papers Mitchell had dropped.

"Crazy," the woman said, more to herself than to the pair from headquarters. "Four times this morning he's done that. Guess the news don't go fast enough to suit him."

Stringer grinned at Garvey when he picked up a paper and tossed the change into a saucer.

"The guy is expecting some news, Jim," Garvey said. "You get it, don't you? He knows the cops know whose gun it was pumped the lead into Vanny Banco. He can't figure why the D.A. don't give out."

"Could be," Stringer said, his voice brittle.

"Let's go and talk to Mitchell."

"He'll give out nothing."

"Nothing but nerves, maybe. That'll help."

They went into the hotel and asked the number of Mitchell's room. It was on the seventh floor and they went up and knocked on the door of Room 702.

"Who is it?" Mitchell called out.

"Cops!" Garvey said.

A half minute of silence intervened before Mitchell opened the door. His eyes widened a bit and a muscle in his usually impassive face jumped when he looked at Stringer.

"Come on in," Mitchell said. "What do you want with me?"

"Just feel sociable."

Stringer grinned and looked around the room when Mitchell closed the door behind him. A steamer trunk was standing in a corner and it looked as if it were being packed.

"Getting ready to check out?" Garvey asked. "Thought you'd have pulled out right away after you beat that rap, Mitch. Now that folks here know what you can do with those fingers of yours, they'll know who to look for if a check—"

MITCHELL was a thin man with a bulging forehead that jutted out over a pair of small bright eyes. He looked more like a student of astronomy than the cleverest forger in the country. His eyes became stormy and for a moment Stringer expected him to lash out at him with a torrent of abuse. Instead, Mitchell smiled and asked if they would have a drink.

"No, thanks," Stringer said with emphasis. "Never touch the stuff myself, Mitchell."

He sat down in a chair, stretched his legs, and took a pack of cigarettes from his pocket. He drew one of the smokes out and tapped an end of it against his knee. It slid out of his fingers and fell to the floor. He bent over to pick it up, and he froze in that position. The phone was ringing.

Mitchell went over to the writing table in the corner and lifted the receiver.

"No, you've got the wrong number," Mitchell said. He hung up and turned away from the desk. The interruption had its effect on his nerves. Listen, coppers, you got no business here. I'm clear of the courts. I know my rights and I'm asking you—"

Stringer straightened in his chair, his face hard. He was crumpling the cigarette between his fingers. The phone jangled again and Mitchell let it alone. Stringer saw that muscle in Mitchell's face jump again.

"Let's get going, Lew," Stringer said. "Mitchell is right."

"Something tells me he was stalling that guy on the phone," Garvey said, as they left the elevator and hurried out of the Delmore.

"Nerves fray," Stringer said. "A person is like a fresh bouquet, Lew. In the morning he's full of pep, but by the time night blows around he wilts a little. There has to be a

payoff for what happened to Vanny Banco and to me. Mitchell is getting ready to move out, but not before he picks up some dough. That lawyer who won Mitchell's case for him—he wasn't so much before. . . . Come on, we're going to call at a clubby little place. Force the hand of the big guy, Lew."

The bartender at the little dive only two blocks away from El Fuente nearly dropped a bottle when Stringer and Garvey came in.

"Two beers, pal," Stringer said when he leaned over the bar. "Forget the knockout tablets."

"I don't get you," the bartender said and reached for a beer glass.

It slipped out of his fingers and crashed on the floor. A man turned away from the bar and went into the back room. After a short silence, Stringer heard a door bang shut, twice.

"Funny, Lew," Stringer said. "Everybody acts like I'd come back from the grave. Well, let's get going. We got a lot of work to do."

"We're getting nowhere," Garvey said. "You've cut your time in half, Jim."


"Let's go over to Headquarters," Stringer said. "The pressure is on, pal. Some guys are getting ready to break wide open. They want some dough. When you knock off a guy like Banco, there's plenty of dough involved. Anyway, Banco couldn't have lived on just my losses, Lew." And Stringer laughed quickly.

Back again in the D.A.'s office, Jim Stringer looked kind of beaten. The boss asked him if he had broken through anywhere. "I'll tell you before my time is up," Stringer said. "I think I'll go in and ask Draper some stuff about Mitchell—a few things I'd like to know."

Stringer went into the assistant D.A.'s office but Draper was not there. He sat down and waited for a few minutes. Then Draper came in just as Stringer was going out. The assistant was putting a fresh gardenia in his buttonhole.

"Hello, Stringer," Draper said. "Any luck? Listen, this all looks pretty fishy to me, Jim. You might as well come out with it and get yourself a break. The fact that you were a drinking man once—that

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woman where you live told me you'd come in as stiff as a poker! No jury will believe that story about whisky being poured into you. I'm trying to make it as easy as I can, but—"

"I see," Jim Stringer said, his eyes scanning everything on Draper's desk. "I'll let you know by five o'clock in the morning, Mr. Draper."

His fingers toyed with the bullet dangling from his watch chain. The smell of Draper's gardenia sickened him a little. He got up and went out.

"Come on, Lew," Stringer said, when he returned to the D.A.'s office. "We got tonight."

Three blocks away from Headquarters, Stringer went into a cigar store and called the Delmore. The clerk told him that Mitchell was checking out in just an hour. He ran out, calling to Garvey who was over at the cigar counter, and flagged a taxi.

Stringer and Garvey got out of the cab in front of the hotel and hurried inside. Stringer went to the transportation desk, flashed his badge.

"The guy in Seven-o-two—Mitchell" the detective said. "He get his train reservations here?"

"Yeah. To St. Louis. Leaves from Penn Station at six-twenty-five. What's the trouble?"

"Never mind," Stringer said. Just forget I asked."

"Mitchell got his," Stringer said, going out with Garvey. "Or is getting it. We'll be at the station, and maybe he'll get plenty more. I won't need all of the next twelve hours."

CHAPTER IV

A FINANCIAL DEAL



crowd was in front of the gate marked "TRACK 16." The St. Louis train was going out in ten minutes. Stringer and Garvey stood around facing the gate, newspapers held up in front of them.

Mitchell came toward the gate at six-twenty and suddenly stopped. A kid

not more than seventeen stared at him.

"Over here, kid," Mitchell said. "I'm the guy you're looking for."

"Come on," Stringer said. He got hold of the youngster's arm and said, "It's the cops, son. I'll take that big envelope."

Mitchell tried to tear himself loose from Garvey, but the detective had most of Mitchell's coat sleeve in his big right fist.

"Want to make a scene, Mitch?" Stringer said. "Come on, kid. What's in the envelope?"

"Don't know," the messenger said, his voice tight in his throat. "My boss sent me down to give this guy the envelope. I don't know nothing. I haven't done anything!"

"All right," Stringer said. "We'll go to see the D.A., Mitch. If what's in this envelope is what I think, you got a lot of talking to do."

"You got no right—"

"Get your bag and come on," Stringer snapped. "That fee you paid that lawyer broke you, Mitch. If you got dough since then, it's hot. You haven't worked a day in the last two months! . . . Come on, kid, you got nothing to worry about. Just answer some questions. You're on the side of the law, aren't you?"

"I'll tell everything I know!" the kid blurted.

The D.A. was just leaving for the day when Stringer and Garvey came in with Mitchell and the messenger.

"Sorry to detain you, Chief," Stringer said. "Open this envelope and see if there's dough in it. Where's Draper?"

"Gone for the day," the D.A. said, his eyes biting into Mitchell. "Didn't expect to see you for a long time, friend."

"Look, you can't do this to me!" Mitchell cried.

"Where have I heard that before, Lew?"

Stringer chuckled and pushed Mitchell into a chair. The D.A. slit open the long manila envelope and took out five one-thousand-dollar bills.

Mitchell's face oozed little beads of sweat when Stringer swung toward the messenger.

"I—I've got a job I got to keep," the boy said. "I need the job bad! I wasn't to say a word. I—"

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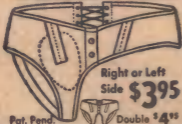
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"Stringer, what do you want here?"
 "You work for the law firm of Draper and Ferguson, don't you?" Stringer said, and Garvey half rose from his chair. "Just answer me that question, son."

The messenger nodded.

"You can go," Stringer said, "Don't worry about the job."

Harry Mitchell was getting smaller where he sat.

"Stringer," the D.A. said quickly, "you realize what you just inferred?"

"Yeah," Stringer said. . . . "Lew, go into Draper's office and get the pads off his desk. The ones that have had paper torn off them. . . . I got it all now, Chief. Draper was into Banco for a big amount of dough. He wanted those memos he had signed and he got Mitchell to get them for him, in Mitchell's own way. He figured out the fall guy, too. Yours truly, Chief. He made a mistake in tearing those little sheets of paper off the pads on his desk to give to Mitchell to write on. You said yourself that they didn't match up with the pads from Banco's office."

"This is crazy, Stringer!" the D.A. said.

"Yeah? Draper laid down on Mitchell's case because he needed him for the job he was figuring on. They got me loaded and doped up, and they took my gun and used it on Vanny. Then they planted the gun on me again. No jury would believe it, Draper said—me having liked my booze at one time."

The D.A.'s lips tightened. "It adds up," he said. "He knew you were after Banco. He'd tell that to a jury and I bet he'd have recommended mercy for you. Self-defense. As long as the guilt was placed on you. Nice work, Jim. You want to pick up Draper?"

"Yeah. And have the boys in the lab check up on those pads with those I.O.U.s I was supposed to have signed. They got ways to tell if they match up with the torn edges on those memo pads of Draper's. And lock up Mitch."

DRAPER lived in an apartment house in the best section of the city. He came to the door in response to Stringer's ring and he had a cocktail shaker in his hands. Feminine laughter tinkled in Stringer's ears. He looked at the fresh gardenia in Draper's lapel.

Draper said irritably. "Any business you want to discuss with me, see me at Headquarters."

"Yeah?" Stringer said, and shouldered Draper back into the little hallway. "See you got a fresh posy, Draper. The one you wore when you called to see Mitchell wasn't fresh. A petal dropped off that one. I got it here in my pocket. I picked it up in Mitchell's place. Kind of yellow it was, the color of the carpet there."

"I don't understand you, Stringer."

"You will. Come with us, mister. We're cops—or did you forget?"

"Take it easy, Stringer," Russell Draper said slowly. "I'll make my excuses to my guests and go with you."

The D.A. was waiting in his office. His eyes bored through Draper when Stringer and Garvey ushered him in.

"All right, Draper," the chief said. "You sent five thousand dollars—I have it right

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here—to Mitchell. The messenger was about to hand it to him in Penn Station."

"That was a personal matter," Draper said. "This is the most outrageous accusation I ever heard of! What if I did have personal dealings with Mitchell?"

"You made a mistake, Draper," the D.A. said. "Those memo pads in Banco's office looked white in the artificial light, but I doubt if you ever saw them in broad daylight. They're lemon-colored, Draper. The ones you had Mitchell forge were on the same texture and color as the ones you use in your office. They are working on them in the lab, now, examining the torn edges. There was a little flaw in the manufacture of that paper. My attention was called to it. I have seen proof enough—you'd better clear it all up."

"I'll say nothing!" Draper snapped.

"Mitchell will. I've been talking to him, Draper, and you know he will save his skin, don't you? Mitchell tells us that five thousand is supposed to be split up between four other men. Tony Morrini, Butch—the idea is to have this five thousand here sent down to Tony. The cops will be on hand to watch the deal, Draper. Mitchell says you haven't paid them off yet. You had to have another day or two, but they were working on you. They wondered why Stringer was loose. They figured there was a slip and they wanted to break away."

Draper's face lost most of its blood and his shoulders sagged.

"How much did Banco nick you for?" Stringer shot at the man.

"Fifty thousand," Draper said.

"Yeah. It would have been a cheap way out." Stringer grinned bleakly. "A saving of forty grand. Tough, Draper!"

Draper stared straight ahead. He nodded. "Get somebody to take it all down," he said. Stringer looked up at the clock.

"Still about eight hours left, Lew," he said. "I'm going to sleep them out and eight on top of them!"

He fell asleep in the leather chair his thumb and forefinger holding onto the little bullet that dangled from his watch chain.

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DYING TO MEET YOU

(Continued from page 89)

head. "When I closed the window, it trapped this feather. If anybody had opened the window, the feather would be blown into the room."

"Try it. Open the window."

Sam did as he was told. The east wind whipped the feather from the sill straight across the room.

Hathaway shook his head. "Then it looks like you're proving you killed the girl, Mr. Hart."

Sam paled at the thought.

"No, no. It must have been the man I thought was Dr. Borden. He said he was a doctor and he went into the bedroom while that woman with the hard lips and I were out in the living room. He could have covered himself with the shower curtain so he wouldn't get blood-stained, taken his pocket knife and killed the girl.

"He thought she had had a chance to tell me something. That framed me for the murder. He didn't want the police to get their hands on me, though, because I might have told what they thought Riccara Borden had told me. So he said I needed a lawyer, sent me to MacFarlan and Wienny. They were going to make me do their dirty work."

Hathaway nodded.

"Then you'd have got something in the neck. It's pretty good reasoning you've done. There was a big jack knife on Scar Harding when we picked him up. The blade was clean, but if that knife is washed, it'll show blood in our lab test. I'll just phone Headquarters."

Sam went out into the living room. The Homicide Squad took charge of everything. Sam sat there and shivered when he saw the morgue basket come in and go out.

Some time later, Hathaway invited him down to the coffee shop for a five o'clock breakfast. Hathaway talked a lot about selling fountain pens. He said he didn't think anybody could analyze anybody's character just by looking at handwriting.

While they were at breakfast, Hathaway

[Turn page]



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received a call from the lab. He came back to the table after a few minutes.

"Congratulations, Mr. Hart. You cracked the case for us. They found blood on Scar Harding's knife. And it's Riccara Borden's blood, so that's about all. Any time you're in town, I wish you'd come around to my office. I like to see a young fellow with your nerve."

Sam thanked Hathaway. Then he went to a phone booth and put in a long distance call that got Edith out of bed.

"I'll be back tonight," he said. "You'd better tell Cole to cancel the banquet. The contest winner was murdered. And—well, I cracked the case!"

"You what?" Edith gasped. "Sam Hart, didn't I warn you not to get into any trouble? Didn't I say—"

"Like a regular G-man, tell Junior," Sam cut in. "And I fought the toughest counterfeiter you ever saw, and knocked him out. Tell that to Junior, too."

S. Nolan Hart cradled the receiver. He walked out of the booth, shoulders squared. Of course, Junior's G-man set had turned the trick, but he had braved the perils of the underworld, and he had risen to the occasion like a man.

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